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ABSTRACT

This publication summarizes the main conclusions of a national survey of 925 public school principals and 1,006 superintendents. The survey was intended to bring about a better understanding of the day-to-day realities school leaders face. The survey asked the principals and superintendents about their priorities, most pressing problems, and perspectives on the state of the profession of educational leadership. It gathered information about the issues principals and superintendents face in large districts versus small districts and in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Findings from the survey revolved around the following themes: (1) insufficient funding; (2) the overregulation and micromanagement of schools; (3) the challenges of school leadership; (4) the politics of education; (5) the standards and accountability movement; (6) the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act; (7) improving teacher quality; (8) teacher tenure; (9) the role of the principal; and (10) the role of the superintendent. The text is supplemented with numerous graphs, charts, and tables. The report also contains the survey's complete methodology and complete survey questions and results. (WFA)

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Rolling Up Their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk About What's Needed to Fix Public Schools.

Steve Farkas
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Jackie Vine

2003

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Rolling Up Their Sleeves

SUPERINTENDENTS and PRINCIPALS Talk About What's Needed to Fix Public Schools

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Rolling Up Their Sleeves

SUPERINTENDENTS and PRINCIPALS Talk About What's Needed to Fix Public Schools

A report from Public Agenda for The Wallace Foundation

by Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson and Ann Duffett

with Beth Syat and Jackie Vine

ABOUT THE WALLACE FOUNDATION

The Wallace Foundation is an independent, national private foundation established by DeWitt and Lila Acheson Wallace, the founders of The Reader's Digest Association. Its mission is to enable institutions to expand learning and enrichment opportunities for all people. It does this by supporting and sharing effective ideas and practices.

To achieve this mission, The Wallace Foundation has three objectives:

- Strengthen education leadership to improve student achievement
- Improve after-school learning opportunities
- Expand participation in arts and culture.

For more information and research on education leadership, please visit www.wallacefoundation.org.

ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Our in-depth research on how the public thinks about policy has won praise for its credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum. Our citizen education materials and award-winning Web site, **www.publicagenda.org**, offer unbiased information about important national issues. Recently recognized by *Library Journal* as one of the Web's best resources, Public Agenda Online provides comprehensive information on a wide range of policy issues.

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And Public Agenda President Ruth A. Wooden, for her vision, insight and invaluable contributions to the interpretation of this research.

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School leaders have embraced the standards and accountability movement—only handfuls think it is just a fad, and many indicate they have been focusing on student achievement, teacher quality and accountability for quite some time. Large majorities say their districts are working to reduce the achievement gap between minority and white students, improve the language skills of non-English-speaking students and enhance the impact teachers and principals have on student achievement. Superintendents in urban districts seem to be especially responsive to implementing standards.

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There is a complicated, ambivalent mind-set among school leaders with regard to NCLB. Although it is clear to superintendents and principals that the law is here to stay, few think it will work as currently crafted. Although they agree with the spirit of the law, most say adjustments are needed, and many question the political intent behind it. Still, given all the challenges they face, relatively few say NCLB is their major problem. Superintendents from large school districts are consistently more optimistic about the benefits of NCLB.

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Teacher tenure is a sore spot for school leaders. Most say teachers receive tenure without proving effective know-how, and, according to most superintendents and principals, it's difficult—sometimes almost impossible—to remove a tenured teacher. Majorities say the union sometimes fights to protect inadequate teachers and sometimes resists doing things that would improve education. Teachers' views of their unions, not surprisingly, are considerably more positive.

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Most superintendents think that a good principal is key to a successful school; principals, for their part, are less likely to feel a principal alone can fix a troubled school. Superintendents are more likely than principals to think it's a good idea to hold principals accountable based on student achievement. Overall, superintendents give principals a mediocre performance evaluation and seem especially concerned about their ability to determine teacher quality. Both groups give unenthusiastic reviews to formal administrator training programs, and few view principal certification as proof of high-quality skills.

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Superintendents say they face countless daily obstacles in their high-stress, high-visibility position, yet they respond with a "can do" confidence and a willingness to be held accountable for their district's performance. On six out of six important measures, substantial numbers of principals say their own superintendent is excellent. Superintendents acknowledge that they put a great deal of energy into managing their school board, but it pays off: most report positive superintendent-board relations.

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Putting School Leadership on the Public Agenda

By M. Christine DeVita, President, The Wallace Foundation

The Wallace Foundation is pleased to have supported two opinion research reports, conducted by Public Agenda, on the roles of school leaders in improving education for all children.

The first widely-cited report, *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk About School Leadership*, was released in November 2001. It found that school leaders felt confident that they can make an enormous difference in student learning. But all too often, they also felt overwhelmed by the politics and difficult conditions of their jobs.

This new survey, *Rolling Up Their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk About What's Needed to Fix Public Schools*, adds importantly to that message. It reveals that even as leaders report that they are focusing as never before on curriculum, instruction, mentoring and professional development—all designed to improve classroom teaching—they are hamstrung by red tape, competing laws and regulations, and inadequate resources to meet increased requirements and mandates.

Superintendents and principals say they applaud the goals of the new federal No Child Left Behind Act. But they also tell us they remain unsure about whether that national mandate will lead to improved public schools. The significance is clear. Our nation needs capable leaders. And our school leaders need the right conditions—redefined jobs to reflect new responsibilities, the authority to match those responsibilities and incentives to attract talented leaders to the most challenging schools and districts—to help them deliver on the promise of excellence and opportunity for all children.

The good news is that two years after Public Agenda's first survey, superintendents and principals believe more attention is being paid to leadership's vital role in ensuring that students learn to high standards. As we deepen our understanding of how leadership can help schools and districts fulfill that promise to all children, the voices of our education leaders must also be heard.

M. Christine DeVita

Introduction

In 2001, when Public Agenda surveyed public school principals and superintendents, the results revealed a bold streak of "can do" thinking. They had problems and complaints, to be sure, but nearly 7 in 10 said that effective, intelligent leadership could transform even the most troubled schools. Most resoundingly rejected the idea that saving a failing school is so difficult that one individual can't make headway.*

Looking for a Few Good Leaders

Principals and superintendents aren't the only ones who believe that school leadership is the key to improving public education. The U.S. Department of Education, in partnership with a variety of private foundations, has set up the School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative to look at ways to enhance leadership nationwide. In New York City, Schools Chancellor Joel Klein has made finding and supporting good principals and district superintendents a centerpiece of his drive to reinvigorate Big Apple schools.

Thanks to a series of reports and articles by leading foundations, think tanks and commissions, there is an energetic debate about how to lure top managerial talent to public education and what conditions are necessary for them to exercise leadership.[1] There are also discussions about how much school leaders should be paid and how they should be held accountable, not to mention how districts should respond to the expected retirement of nearly 40% of the nation's 92,000 principals in the next several years.[2]

Intelligence from the Front Lines

With support from The Wallace Foundation, which itself has made a major commitment to promoting quality leadership in public education, Public Agenda also has turned its attention to these questions. Two years ago, we completed *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game*, our initial survey of school leaders conducted for Wallace. Here we summarize the chief conclusions from a new survey conducted in 2003. In both surveys, our purpose has been quite specific. We hope to understand the day-to-day realities school leaders face by talking to them firsthand and getting their reports directly from the front lines.

Rolling Up Their Sleeves is based on a national mail survey completed by 1,006 public school superintendents and 925 public school principals. In part, the survey revisits issues covered in the initial study. For example, we ask school leaders about their priorities and most pressing problems. We look at the issues leaders face in large districts versus small ones and in urban, suburban and rural areas. In effect, we give school leaders an opportunity to tell us about their pet peeves and present their own "wish list" for change. We ask them for their perspective on the state of the profession itself.

Red Tape and Testing

But we also delve into topics that we touched on only briefly in our first outing. Because school leaders complained bitterly about bureaucracy, red tape and unfunded state and federal mandates in 2001, we tackle those subjects in greater detail. Since the testing and reporting provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) are kicking in nationwide, we ask school leaders to tell us about the impact the law is having in their own districts. And since teacher tenure and unions emerged as unexpectedly important topics in our first survey, we spend more time on them here.

Like most Public Agenda studies, *Rolling Up Their Sleeves* represents the fruits of a multifaceted research project that included more than crafting a questionnaire and tabulating the results. Prior to designing the survey, Public Agenda analyzed surveys of school leaders conducted by other groups

*These findings are based on *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk About School Leadership* (2001), the first study about school leadership conducted by Public Agenda for The Wallace Foundation. Data from *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game* are referenced throughout this report; trend data may be found in the Complete Survey Results on page 49.

and reviewed our own work in the area. We also completed a series of focus group interviews with practicing superintendents and principals, including those in urban, suburban and rural districts from different parts of the country. More detailed information about the methodology Public Agenda used to design and conduct this study can be found on page 48.

From Testing to Vouchers to Parental Involvement

This in-depth look at the views of school leaders is the latest among dozens of opinion studies on public education that Public Agenda has conducted over the last decade. We have examined a broad swath of topics, including standards and testing, safety and discipline, teacher quality, accountability, integration, parental involvement, and vouchers and school choice, among others. We have sampled the views of diverse groups, including the general public, parents, teachers, students, employers, college professors and professors in schools of education. We looked at the perspective of key subgroups in the population such as white, African American, Latino and foreign-born parents.

School leaders resoundingly rejected the idea that saving a failing school is so difficult that one individual can't make headway.

Rashomon and the Public Schools

In one recent publication, *Where We Are Now*, Public Agenda sifted through its hundreds of survey items, identified the most important and described how parents, teachers, students and others see the current state of public schooling. Some who read the report believed they saw what might be called the Rashomon effect. Like the characters in the Japanese film who relate very different stories about the same incident, parents, teachers, students and others bring their own reality to the issue of education. Each group has its particular frustrations, each its hoped-for solutions. Each perspective is important, and each should be absorbed by anyone who is serious about improving public education.

Give Me the Freedom, Remove the Constraints

But the "can do" stance of the nation's principals and superintendents, especially the superintendents, is distinctive. Teachers, by contrast, typically believe that solutions to many problems facing public education are out of their hands.[4] Parents and students, perhaps understandably, are focused primarily on their own personal situations.[4]

Principals and superintendents seem to take a different tack. Put us in charge, they say, so we can be effective. Give us more freedom, remove some of the hurdles, and we can do the job. It is an attitude that commands attention. And, it could easily be argued, school leaders' willingness to shoulder responsibility for changing schools makes their take on what ails public education particularly compelling.

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FINDING ONE:
Money and Mandates

Superintendents and principals point to insufficient funding as the biggest challenge they face, although most say they can manage with what they have. Keeping up with local, state and federal mandates takes up too much of their time, they say, and most believe schools are being overregulated and micromanaged from above. The No Child Left Behind Act and special education are two areas of federal legislation that trigger a great deal of frustration.

Heading up a school or leading a school district offers many challenges—deciding on school policy, hiring and supervising staff, working with unions, contractors and suppliers, managing relations with the school board, managing school facilities, handling the press, working with elected officials, involving parents and so on. So what, according to the 1,006 public school superintendents and 925 principals surveyed for *Rolling Up Their Sleeves*, is the toughest challenge? What is the biggest hurdle school leaders face?

"Racked" by Budget Crises

With public schools "racked by state and local budget crises," as *The New York Times* puts it,[1] it is hardly surprising that principals and superintendents consider money to be problem *numero uno*. Creating reliable budgets for complex organizations is never easy; meeting the bottom line is always tough; today's economy is sluggish; and taxpayers can be a notoriously cranky and unappreciative lot even in much brighter economic times. Money is a big problem for school leaders, and they don't hesitate to say so. But just beneath the surface of their money concerns is one aspect they find especially galling: the cost of obeying state and federal laws that require them to put very specific services or policies in place. According to school leaders, there are far too many of these mandates. They come in regularly from federal, state and local governments. Most don't come with sufficient funding. And even when the money is there, the mandates are often abstruse, time-consuming and out of sync with laws and regulations already on the books.

Getting By with Less and Less

Asked to choose the most pressing issue facing their district, 70% of superintendents and 58% of principals say it is "insufficient school funding." By contrast, mere handfuls say "poor teacher quality" or "lack of strong and talented administrators" is their top problem. One in 5 superintendents (20%) and 1 in 3 principals (33%) choose "implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act" as their major challenge, although, as we discuss later, lack of adequate funding is one of the major complaints school leaders have about the law.

Funding Is the Top Issue

Which is the most pressing issue facing your district these days?

	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Insufficient school funding	70%	58%
or Implementation of NCLB	20%	33%
or Lack of strong, talented administrators	6%	4%
or Poor teacher quality	3%	3%

When it comes to your budget, would you say lack of funding is:

	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
A problem but you can make progress given what you have	68%	68%
or Such a critical problem that only minimal progress can be made	27%	23%
or Not much of a problem	4%	10%

Note: Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Full question wording is available in the Complete Survey Results at the end of this report. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

Moreover, school leaders say, money problems are more severe than in the past. The number of school leaders who say funding is their top problem has risen in recent years, and 85% of superintendents and 80% of principals say the situation in their own district has gotten worse. In fact, 27% of superintendents and 23% of principals say lack of funding is such a critical problem in their district that only minimal progress can be made. Yet, as perhaps further evidence of their "can do" spirit, nearly 7 in 10 school leaders (68% of superintendents and 68% of principals) say "lack of funding is a problem but [they] can make progress given what [they] have."

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Unforseen Costs

Ironically, it's not finding money for school buildings, textbooks and teacher salaries that seems most daunting to the school leaders surveyed here. Again and again, school leaders complained about the cost of meeting state and federal mandates. Questions about various kinds of mandates drew some of the strongest reactions in the entire survey. School leaders interviewed for *Rolling Up Their Sleeves* could recite chapter and verse about the unforeseen costs of what seem like simple, straightforward ideas for improving schools. As one frustrated superintendent put it: "Some items are well intended, [but] most of the lawmakers don't have a clue what the unintended consequences of their laws will be...I really don't think they read most of them."

"Some items are well intended, [but] most of the lawmakers don't have a clue what the unintended consequences of their laws will be...I really don't think they read most of them."

–SUPERINTENDENT

For example, 93% of superintendents and 88% of principals say that their district has experienced "an enormous increase in responsibilities and mandates without getting the resources necessary to fulfill them." And there's evidence from the survey that this particular managerial challenge strikes an especially raw nerve: Most superintendents and principals say this comes very close to their view (60% and 52%).

A Mandate Here and a Mandate There

One superintendent interviewed for the project reeled off an itemized list of the mandates he has to cope with. By law, he said, his schools must provide oral health instruction and information about organ donation, institute "antibullying" policies, insure that children say the Pledge of Allegiance, make sure that social studies classes celebrate Freedom Week, organize required parent involvement committees at every school with a paid facilitator and district coordinator (for which no additional funds were provided), set up required committees on certain employee policies, set up required school and district committees on "Closing the Gap," arrange for employees such as bus drivers to have two paid breaks, see that each teacher has a specific amount to spend on classroom supplies, and include the body mass index of each child on his or her report card. "Oh, by the way," the superintendent added, "remember No Child Left Behind!"

The Problem with Funding

% who say:

	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Their district has experienced an enormous increase in responsibilities and mandates without getting necessary resources	93%	88%
Reduction in funding has gotten worse	85%	80%
Insufficient funding is the most pressing issue facing their district	70%	58%

The Cost of Doing What the Feds Say

The No Child Left Behind Act is one of two federal mandates that seem to generate particular resentment. Almost 9 in 10 superintendents and principals voiced a "major concern" that NCLB is an unfunded mandate, and they were often quick to point out its costs. One superintendent said that meeting the law's "highly-qualified teacher" requirement (which requires that teachers of core subjects have state certification, hold a bachelor's degree and demonstrate subject area competency) "is not possible without a massive infusion of new money to hire additional teachers." He also spoke about the costs associated with testing requirements: "Handling the tests, test security, packaging and shipping the tests to be scored by the state, analyzing and interpreting the result—all require additional personnel time."

This superintendent went on to say that the "requirement to disaggregate the data at the district, school and classroom levels" meant obtaining costly new computer programming and software. He also focused on the need for remedial help to insure that all students are "proficient." "To date," he said, "there have been no federal funds and only a very small amount from our state."

Too Much Paperwork

The other area of federal law that attracts school leaders' ire is special education. Eighty-three percent of superintendents and 65% of principals agree that they are "obligated to spend a disproportional amount of money and other resources on special education." Large majorities also agree that the volume and complexity of federal and state regulations regarding special education have gotten worse in recent years. Again, school leaders were quick to explain how the law, while well intentioned, costs their districts money. "Our district [of 4,000 students] decided we had to...hire our own special ed director. There was simply too much paperwork to attend to. Plus, our teaching staff was not filling out the forms the way the state felt they should. We also budget a hefty amount for legal fees in this area since parents and lawyers find it worthwhile to litigate for just about any reason. Finally, one-third—that's right, 33%—of our transportation budget is for transporting special-needs children."

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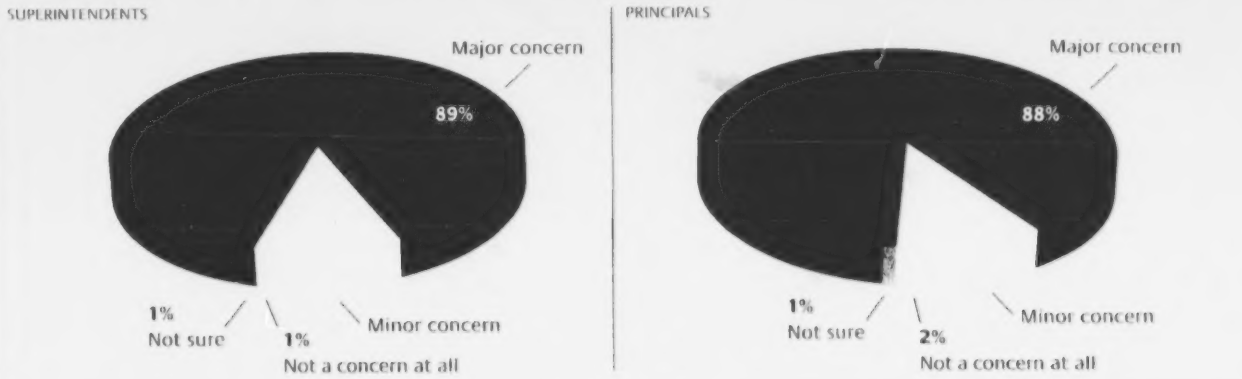
NCLB: Show Me the Money

Some people have voiced concerns about specific parts of NCLB. How much of a concern is this to you: NCLB is an unfunded mandate.



Another superintendent also focused on transportation problems. When a disabled child cannot travel on the regular school bus, he explained, "We must provide extra special transportation. The school system pays for that. When any doctor—regardless of specialty or training and without opportunity for challenge or appeal—decrees it, we must also provide a full-time nurse *on the bus*, at market rates, for that one child. Or we are forced to contract for special one-child transportation, sometimes even paying the child's own parents to transport the child to and from school at market rates! We have more than one family…who bring in more money from the school system by being paid to drive their own children to and from school than many of our teacher assistants make in total salary! That's insanity, and it's robbery perpetrated against the taxpayers…."

Special Ed Drains Districts

% who say:	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Administrators are obligated to spend a disproportional amount of money and other resources on special education	83%	65%
The volume and complexity of federal and state regulations regarding special education have gotten worse in recent years	83%	81%

Over 3,500 Pages of Education Law

But even if federal and state mandates for public schools were fully funded—and school leaders claim they rarely are—there would still be problems. According to the nation's superintendents and principals, these laws are just way too complex and cumbersome. "Keeping up with state and federal mandates …is extremely time-consuming," one superintendent told us. "We have an education code that is over 3,500 pages, and that doesn't even include all the laws…within the health and safety code and government codes to which we must adhere. Add regulations from the federal government—which can often conflict with state codes or our local labor contracts—and we spend a lot of time trying to straighten out the confusion." In the end, more than 8 in 10 superintendents and principals say keeping up with all the local, state and federal mandates handed down to schools takes up way too much time.

"Can You Tell That I'm Frustrated and Disgusted?"

Although unfunded federal mandates tend to attract the headlines and op-ed articles, the superintendents and principals surveyed here seem equally concerned about what they view as overregulation at the state and local levels. One superintendent acknowledged the good intentions behind many of the mandates but complained that the legislature in his state was "micromanaging" the schools. Others somewhat bitterly pointed out the degree to which mandates detract from the main thrust of public education. "I'm sure you've noticed by now," said one superintendent, "that very little of what I mentioned above [has] anything to do with leading instructional change, supervising 25 school sites or becoming a known and respected member of my school community."

"Our district [of 4,000 students] decided we had to…hire our own special ed director. There was simply too much paperwork to attend to."

–SUPERINTENDENT

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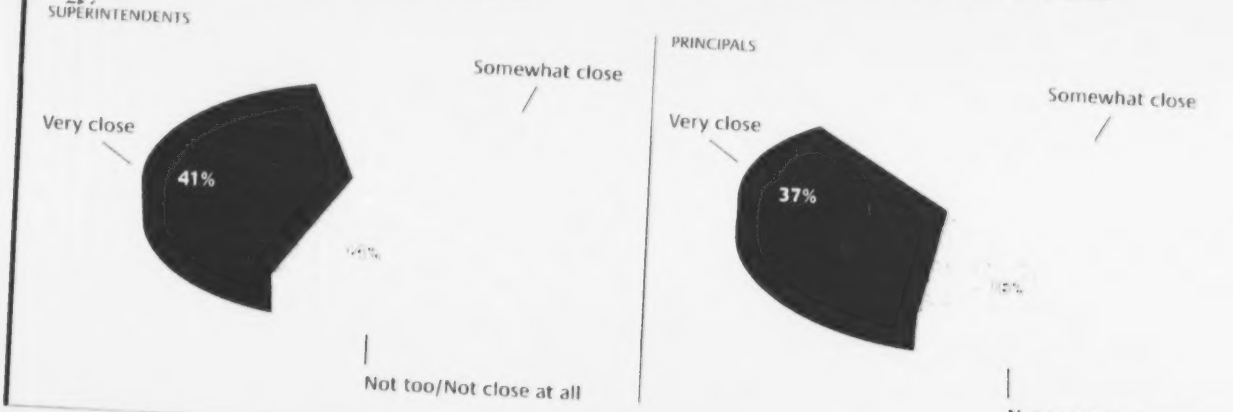
Another, while he spoke mainly about special education, seemed to sum up some school leaders' discouragement: "You can certainly quote me, and I'll be happy to testify before Congress if necessary.... We've gone so far overboard that we can no longer even hope to meet our [special-needs students'] real education needs. We're far too busy satisfying bureaucratic demands to be bothered with actual teaching and learning. Can you tell that I'm frustrated and disgusted?"

Keeping Up with Mandates Is Time Consuming

Keeping up with all the local, state and federal mandates handed down to the schools takes up way too much time. How close does this come to describing your district?



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FINDING TWO:
In the Hot Seat

Superintendents and principals agree that being a school leader is an exceptionally challenging job. They say the ability to manage politics is the key to survival and point to "politics and bureaucracy" as the main reason colleagues leave the field. In addition to orchestrating all that is needed to run their school or district, they also juggle complaining parents, cumbersome special education laws, threats of litigation and uninformed press coverage of education.

They endure the high anxiety that comes with meeting the bottom line; they plow their way through what one superintendent called a "mountain of paperwork." But even without these formidable challenges, heading a public school or school system is a stressful job. Balky bureaucracies, quarrelsome parents, pressure from special interests, the threat of lawsuits and inaccurate or sensational press coverage also leave their mark.

Nearly Universal Agreement—It's Stressful

Among superintendents, an astonishing 98% say that being a superintendent "is a high-stress, high-visibility job—you have to be able to withstand a lot of heat." And principals back their superintendents on this point. More than 9 in 10 agree that superintendents really are in the hot seat.

For some of the school leaders we spoke with, the crux of the problem is the mismatch between expectations and resources or, as some see it, altogether unrealistic expectations of what schools can do. "Schools today are expected not only to educate and teach citizenry, but to socialize children [and] monitor their physical and psychological health," said one superintendent. "Yet the resources of time and money have not grown with the demands. The superintendent…becomes the target for all of those who feel specific needs are not being met."

"We're an Easy Target"

A principal pointed to the "politicalization [sic] of education." Schools are simply "the easiest target," he continued. "[I recently read a book] about how education gets stuck…trying to cure all society's ills with breakfast programs, lunch programs, everything that we can do to cure society's ills…We're an easy target."

But others see the pressure as part of a much broader social phenomenon—one in which Americans are more questioning and people distrust leadership in many areas: "Our leaders—all leaders in all professions—have systematically betrayed the public confidence they're entrusted with. Our religious leaders …our military leaders…our industrial leaders…our business leaders, our banking leaders, our political leaders…So I think there's a natural suspicion of leadership."

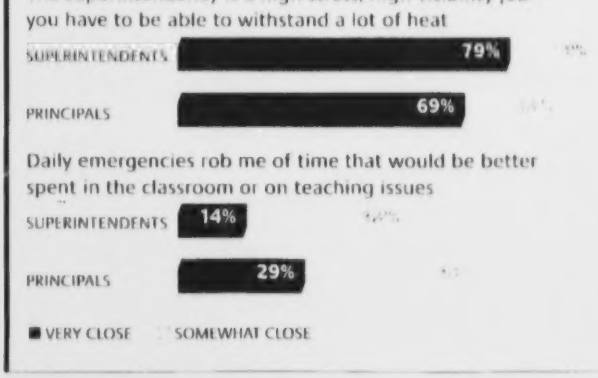
"I Want My Life Back"

Principals may not spend quite as much time in the spotlight as superintendents, but they too face an enormous wall of pressure. In focus groups, principals referred repeatedly to the nonstop, always-on-the-run, crisis-a-minute nature of their jobs. Nearly three-quarters (74%) say "daily emergencies rob [them] of time that would be better spent in the classroom or on teaching issues."

The time crunch takes its toll, according to many we spoke with. One principal summed up the jam-packed schedule she has: "It's become a 24/7 job, and you have no life….My mother keeps getting on my case that I need to stop and smell the roses.

High Stress

% who say this is "very" or "somewhat" close to their view:



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I tell her, 'I don't even get to see them, never mind smell them.' In our own district, we just had two principals resign at the end of this year....Their comments were, 'I want my life back.'"

Another told a similar story, recalling the words of a colleague who had recently left. He remembered him saying, "I don't have a life outside of the school, and I'm not expected to because all these things and all these people want to pull at me....There's just no time for my family, and my family is more important than that."

It's a disturbing prospect, the idea that leading a school or school district could become so difficult that almost no one can do the job.

Too Many Demands, Too Many Hurdles

Some in education circles and the press have speculated whether the push for higher standards and greater accountability might end up driving talented superintendents and principals from the field. But the research conducted for *Rolling Up Their Sleeves* suggests that the real drain on school leaders comes from a different quarter. School leaders describe a frustrating mix of too much nit-picking, not enough time and too many hurdles thrown in their path. Sheer frustration seems to be a recurring theme.

Eighty-two percent of superintendents say politics and bureaucracy are the main reasons colleagues leave the field. By contrast, just 13% point to the pressures of standards and accountability and just 3% to the problems of low pay and prestige. Perhaps not surprisingly, superintendents in large districts are far more likely to point to politics and bureaucracy as the main problem (see chart).

The situation with principals is somewhat different. As we discuss later, many principals are unsettled by what they see as undue attention to testing and test scores. But even among principals, the plurality (49%) pick politics and bureaucracy as the chief reasons school leaders quit; 38% say the cause is the "unreasonable demands" of standards and accountability; while 9% say it is low pay and prestige.

"It's Totally Politics"

Focus groups with school leaders brimmed with comments about how difficult it is for them to get things done and move things along. What gets in the way? Warring factions, special interests, turf battles, paperwork, rules and regulations, litigious parents and a press corps that makes a beeline for the slightest bit of bad news. Being able to negotiate the shoals of these treacherous waters, school leaders say, has become the defining characteristic of the job. And being able to manage the politics is what separates survivors from those who founder on the rocks.

"It's totally politics," said one school leader we interviewed, "whether it's at the local level, at the state level, at the federal level." Another described why she invests the time to work with and around the system: "I think...it takes a long time to get things done. But if you try to speed certain things up... with the stakeholders, you won't get it done, either....It's frustrating that it takes twice as long to get something done as you might [think, and] the larger the system, the longer it takes." Still another talked about the "intentional and unintentional" hurdles that block his way. "The 'system,' whether at the local, district, state or federal level, has little sense of what school life is, and each level creates hurdles to meeting the needs of children and communities."

In the end, only 35% of superintendents and 31% of principals say the system "helps [them] get things done the way [they]

What Drives the Talented Away?

If you had to pick one of the following, which comes closest to your own view? Talented superintendents/principals who leave the field are most likely to leave because they are frustrated by:

	SUPERINTENDENTS OVERALL	LARGE-DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS (10,000+ STUDENTS)	SMALL-DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS (<2,500 STUDENTS)	PRINCIPALS OVERALL
Politics and bureaucracy	82%	89%	67%	49%
or				
Unreasonable demands brought about by higher standards and accountability	13%	7%	25%	38%
or				
Low pay and prestige	3%	1%	6%	9%
or				
Lack of effort from students	•	•	1%	1%

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want." Almost half indicate that they generally have to "work around the system" to get things done (47% and 45%). A not insubstantial number (15% of superintendents and 21% of principals) say they feel their "hands are tied by the way things are done" in their district.

Second-Guessers

Public Agenda's surveys have repeatedly shown that uninvolved parents—and perhaps a few who are much too involved—are a primary concern among teachers.[6] Most parents are cooperative, teachers say, but far too many are not.[7] In focus groups, teachers often trade war stories about parents who refuse to accept responsibility, parents who believe their child can do no wrong, parents who demand special treatment and parents who are just plain AWOL.

School leaders also have their complaints about parents. In a recent MetLife survey of principals, more than 4 in 10 said that all or most of the students in their school "have parents who need to be more involved in what their children are learning in school."[8] About half of superintendents (53%) and principals (51%) in the current survey say the problem of "parents complaining about school personnel or second-guessing their decisions" has gotten worse in recent years, compared to about 1 in 3 who say it is about the same as in the past and about 1 in 10 who say it has gotten better.

Relative Calm on the Academic Front

Surprisingly, perhaps, parents' major complaints do not seem to be about testing or academics. Despite higher standards for promotion and graduation in many districts, comparatively low percentages (29% of superintendents and 37% of principals) say that "parents complaining about too much academic pressure" has gotten worse. The exception here seems to be in elementary schools, where 43% of principals say they see a rise in such complaints. Fifty-seven percent of superintendents and 49% of principals say parents complaining about academic pressure has remained about the same (12% in each group say it has gotten better).

The school leaders' overall judgments dovetail with what Public Agenda has learned in other surveys: Most parents do not seem unduly upset by standards and testing. More than 8 in 10 parents say that local schools have been "careful and reasonable" in putting higher standards in place. Just 12% of parents complain that their child is taking too many standardized tests; most (61%) say their child is taking about the right number.[9]

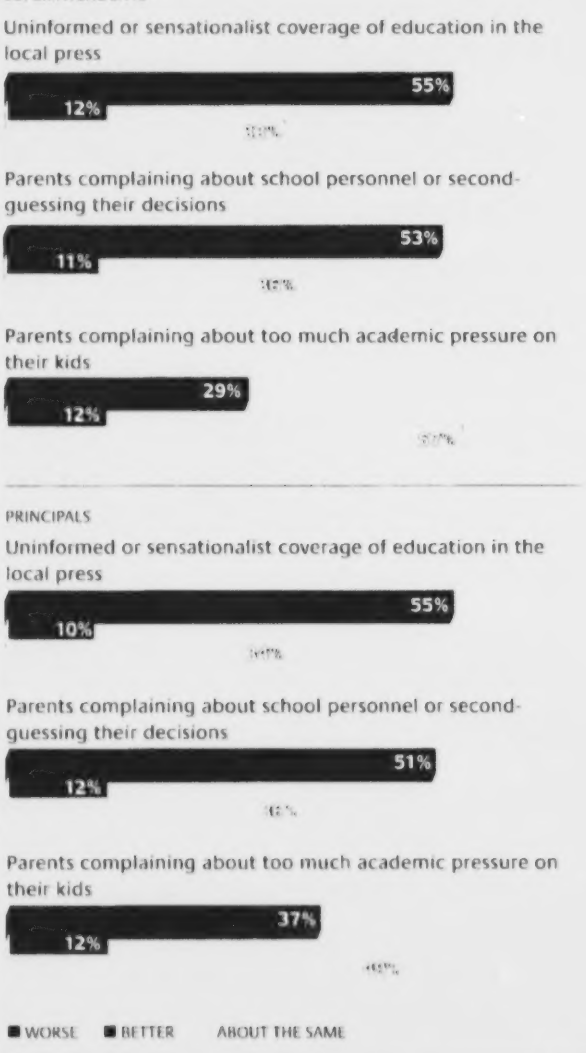
They Want Instant Gratification

The vantage point of superintendents and principals is different from that of teachers since they are higher up on the chain of command. But like teachers, they find some of today's parents exasperating. One principal blamed the problem on an "instant gratification" society: "Parents and society right now get instant results so fast in so many areas that they expect instant results immediately from a school. And if they don't get the answer they want, then they're going to continue until they get the answer that they want. So...if you say no to someone, then they're going to keep going up the channels until they find a yes."

A superintendent also saw a generational problem. "Teachers who taught in the seventies [tell me that] the parents were easy to

Getting Better All the Time?

In your district/school, has [insert item] gotten worse, better or stayed about the same in recent years?



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deal with, but the children were rebellious. And now today the parents are rebellious and the children are easy to deal with. You kind of laugh at it…but it was a pretty good observation. Parents have grown up having been taught to question authority."

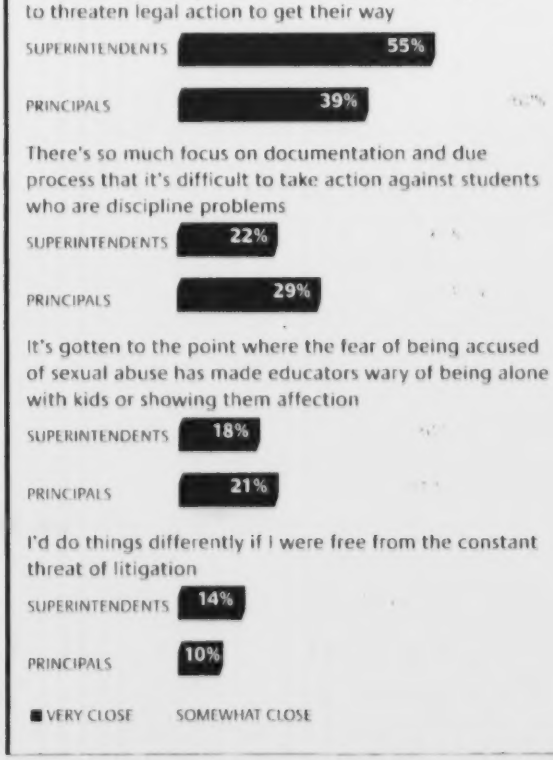
Band, Athletics

For school leaders, parents are not only individuals who must be dealt with, but potential constituencies with potential power. "You have groups of parents like band, athletics, [advanced placement], all the special interest groups…two to three people with sob stories can get significant legislation passed."

Of course, parents with problems do not always head for the statehouse. Some take their cases to court. Nearly 9 in 10 superintendents (88%) and 8 in 10 principals (80%) complain that special education laws give parents "a sense of entitlement" and make them "too quick to threaten legal action to get their way." Majorities say that litigation and the threat of litigation have made educators "wary of being alone with kids or showing them affection" (58% of superintendents and 56% of principals).

Litigation and Documentation

% who say this is "very" or "somewhat" close to their view:


Special education laws have encouraged a sense of entitlement among parents, making them too quick to threaten legal action to get their way
SUPERINTENDENTS
55%
PRINCIPALS
39%
There's so much focus on documentation and due process that it's difficult to take action against students who are discipline problems
SUPERINTENDENTS
22%
PRINCIPALS
29%
It's gotten to the point where the fear of being accused of sexual abuse has made educators wary of being alone with kids or showing them affection
SUPERINTENDENTS
18%
PRINCIPALS
21%
I'd do things differently if I were free from the constant threat of litigation
SUPERINTENDENTS
14%
PRINCIPALS
10%
VERY CLOSE
SOMEWHAT CLOSE

Discipline is another dicey area for school leaders. Majorities of superintendents (63%) and principals (66%) say today's emphasis on "documentation and due process" makes it "difficult to take action against students who are discipline problems."

Yet despite broad concerns about possible litigation, particularly in the area of special ed, school leaders are divided on how much they would change if they didn't have to worry about it. Almost half of superintendents (47%) and 38% of principals say they would "do things differently" if they were freed "from the constant threat of litigation." On the other hand, 53% of superintendents and 62% of principals say this is not close to their view.

School leaders describe a frustrating mix of too much nit-picking, not enough time and too many hurdles thrown in their path. Sheer frustration seems to be a recurring theme.

Newspapers That Don't Get Their Facts Straight

There is another problem that seems to be on the rise according to school leaders. Fifty-five percent of both superintendents and principals say that "uninformed or sensationalist coverage of education in the local press" has gotten worse. What's more, superintendents in large districts (60%) and principals in large schools (70%) are even more likely to cite problems with the press. School leaders' complaints about local press coverage will sound familiar to anyone who is frequently in the news—small incidents blown out of proportion, a focus on the bad with little coverage of the good and more than a few outright mistakes.

"I don't think [covering education] is a very desirable job," commented one school leader we interviewed, "and so what you see at least at the local level is a constant changing of reporters.…There's no longevity in what they know about the tradition or the history of the district. At the state level… what we see is that the papers, more often than not, don't get all their facts straight." And, he continued, "They do form public opinion [by the way] they choose to represent a topic."

I'm Juggling as Fast as I Can

A high-visibility, high-stress job. Trying to maneuver through the politics and bureaucracy. Not enough hours in the day. One image that springs to mind in tallying up the challenges and hurdles facing school leaders is that of a juggler—one with too few arms and too many balls in the air. It may be easy to catch one or two balls, and very talented, well-trained, committed people can juggle quite a few effectively. But when

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does it become too much? When do things spin out of control? When does the system become so complex and chaotic, with so many varying demands and requirements, that almost no one can manage it?

It's a disturbing prospect, the idea that leading a school or school district could become so difficult that almost no one can do the job. However, as we show in later chapters, school leaders themselves are quite optimistic that some specific reforms could produce dramatic change. And sometimes something as prosaic as an extra pair of hands can be meaningful to someone who is stressed to the max. "Probably one of the nicest things I had happen to me this past year," said one principal we spoke with, "was [that] my district finally gave me one position to do nothing but deal with all the stuff that hits you all the time, [all the stuff] that bogs you down."

FINDING THREE:
Standards Are Here to Stay

School leaders have embraced the standards and accountability movement—only handfuls think it is just a fad, and many indicate they have been focusing on student achievement, teacher quality and accountability for quite some time. Large majorities say their districts are working to reduce the achievement gap between minority and white students, improve the language skills of non-English-speaking students and enhance the impact teachers and principals have on student achievement. Superintendents in urban districts seem to be especially responsive to implementing standards.

The education field has a reputation for launching initiatives with great fanfare and then abandoning them when they are hit by changes in leadership, shrinking budgets or political pressure. Reasonably, one might expect the nation's school leaders to adopt a wary, "this too shall pass" perspective toward academic standards. After all, many have been around long enough to see plenty (in this survey, 44% of superintendents and 41% of principals have served at their present level for 10 or more years). But this is hardly the case: almost 9 in 10 superintendents and principals (87% and 85%) believe that the push for standards, testing and accountability in their state is here to stay—very few (7% and 10%) believe it is a fad that will go away.

We're Already Working on It

But the nation's superintendents and principals have not been waiting around for a national initiative—they appear to have been hard at work moving their district toward implementing academic standards and accountability. While the federal government, education groups and pundits are absorbed with weighing the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act, the superintendents and principals interviewed for this project made it perfectly clear that their world had been changing all along. The focus group discussions quickly indicated—and the survey results confirmed—that student achievement, teacher quality and accountability were already bottom-line considerations for many school leaders. The assumptions and policy directions of NCLB are hardly new to them. "See, I think all of us are already at the stage of accountability," said a superintendent. "We have been for several years now looking at test scores, results, data and so on. We've been working on improving test scores for a long time. We have had many initiatives in our district to improve the achievement. But it's not a result of No Child Left Behind."

For example, the vast majority of both superintendents and principals (83% and 76%) report their districts have been making "a concerted effort to tackle the achievement gap between minority and white students." Nearly identical percentages (84% of superintendents and 76% of principals) say there's been a "greater focus on quickly improving the language skills of non-English-speaking students."

Districts Try Harder

% who say this is "currently happening" in their district:

	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
A greater focus on quickly improving the language skills of non-English-speaking students	84%	76%
A concerted effort to tackle the achievement gap between minority and white students	83%	76%

Is This Teacher Excellent?

Many school leaders reported that the trend toward accountability has led to tougher scrutiny of teachers—especially the critical decision over granting tenure. "We've raised the bar substantially," said a superintendent. "Just introducing one question has made a big difference. I ask every principal before we tenure teachers, 'Is this teacher excellent?' Not, 'Is this teacher satisfactory and competent,' but, 'Is this teacher excellent?'"

A little more than half (53%) of superintendents say "there's much tougher scrutiny of teachers, and as a result tenure is much more likely to be refused or postponed," although this drops to 36% of principals. Said one superintendent: "When we look at teachers, if there is a gap between the actual achievement results and the observations, we either delay tenure or deny tenure. It's really causing quite an uproar among our union people. We have a teacher who's had nine fabulous

observations. However, the achievement results on her [state] scores for the last two years are below [those] of all the other teachers in her department. That raised a red flag for us. I denied her tenure....For our union, that was [a] horror of horrors. 'How can you do that?'"

"I've Fired a Principal"

When it comes to teacher quality, superintendents look to their principals as the first line of defense. They especially rely on their principals to evaluate teachers and to make recommendations on the critical question of whether or not to award tenure.

Nearly 8 in 10 superintendents (78%) go so far as to say that they evaluate their principals "according to their ability to judge and improve teacher quality," and 57% of principals agree. A superintendent acknowledged that she needed to push her principals to scrutinize their teachers more rigorously: "For principals, it's very difficult sometimes. They're working with the teachers, and they're making decisions about them. The principal has to be helped to make some very tough decisions."

Another superintendent took dramatic action in his district: "I've fired a principal, and I had to do it publicly because she wouldn't resign....I was unhappy with her evaluations. They were very soft, they didn't get at the issues. When the principals understand that, it becomes part of the culture. It's not really unusual now for a teacher not to get tenure. The question we ask [the principal is]: 'Would you spend a million and a quarter on that person? Because that's what you're asking the district to do.' Now, even the softest of my principals understand it's not a bad thing, because you're protecting the children. And that's the issue."

Using the Data

More and more superintendents appear to be holding their principals responsible for student achievement—including raising test scores—and when they're not satisfied, principals may well pay the price. Fully 63% of superintendents say the biggest part of how they evaluate a principal is how successful they are at raising student achievement—only about 1 in 10 point to building and budget (10%) or maintaining teacher quality (11%). More than 4 in 10 superintendents (43%) say they are currently "much more likely" to remove or reassign principals "when student achievement is low in their building" and 29% of principals say this is happening in their district.

When it comes to teacher quality, superintendents look to their principals as the first line of defense.

More than half (53%) of superintendents say that when it comes to evaluating principals in their district, test scores are used as an informal but understood part of the process, while an additional 31% say test scores are an explicit part of the performance appraisal. Only 15% of superintendents say they don't really look at students' standardized test scores at the building level. "There are about 37 targets we've set about evaluation and curriculum, leadership, etc. That's what we look at," a superintendent told us. "What I do is I evaluate.

Tougher Scrutiny

% who say this is "currently happening" in their district:

	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Principals are evaluated according to their ability to judge and improve teacher quality	78%	57%
Much tougher scrutiny of teachers; as a result tenure is much more likely to be refused or postponed	53%	36%
Principals are much more likely to be removed or reassigned when student achievement is low	43%	29%
Students' standardized test scores at classroom level are part of how individual teachers are evaluated	31%	30%

All of our principals get reevaluated once the data come in. All the data—high school graduation rates, SAT scores, ACT scores, kids going to college—all of that data will come in."

Turnaround Artists

Virtually all superintendents (99%) believe that behind every great school there's a great principal. As a corollary to that theory, many turn to proven performers to turn weak schools around, hoping that they will again work their magic. Nearly half (47%) of superintendents report they have actually moved a successful principal to a low-performing school for that purpose. And they also report they've gotten results—87% say the principal turned the school around.

In a focus group for this study, one such principal told us his superintendent made him "an offer he couldn't refuse"—but he knew enough to negotiate some conditions for playing the role of turnaround artist. "I'm a team player, and I was told, 'I feel like this would be the place for you. I think you'd do a good job here as you've done in the past.' Being a principal for a while, I knew that I would have to say yes, but I also knew that there was leverage and you could ask for certain things. So first of all, I asked for an extra assistant principal, and I also asked to reconstitute the faculty and staff. We did, and it went pretty well. But it was a lot of hard work."

More Than a Coach

Many of the school leaders we interviewed for this study believe the principal's job is changing and needs to be redefined. It is no longer enough for them to be good at managing the building and the budget, the reasoning goes, it is now imperative for them to be "instructional leaders."

These sentiments are widespread. Superintendents (83%) and principals (75%) say they are more focused on the substance of teaching—curriculum, teaching techniques, mentoring and professional development—than ever before. A typical comment from a superintendent: "I think one of the most important things principals do is…provide leadership at the building level for classroom instruction and teaching improvement. That becomes much more important than just management avoiding controversy. The question for me is, does their presence make a difference in the teaching quality in that building? So, you have an accountability system and then you evaluate them based on what you hope to accomplish." A superintendent thought the principal's role had been changing for several years: "I don't think that's the result of No Child Left Behind. I just think [it's an] evolution from when principals, many years ago, were just coaches….They were brought into a principalship because they were managers of people. Now, they not only have to be managers of people and buildings, but also able to be an instructional leader."

The language, assumptions and policies of standards writ large were in place, on the ground, in school districts across the nation long before NCLB.

Not Just Lip Service

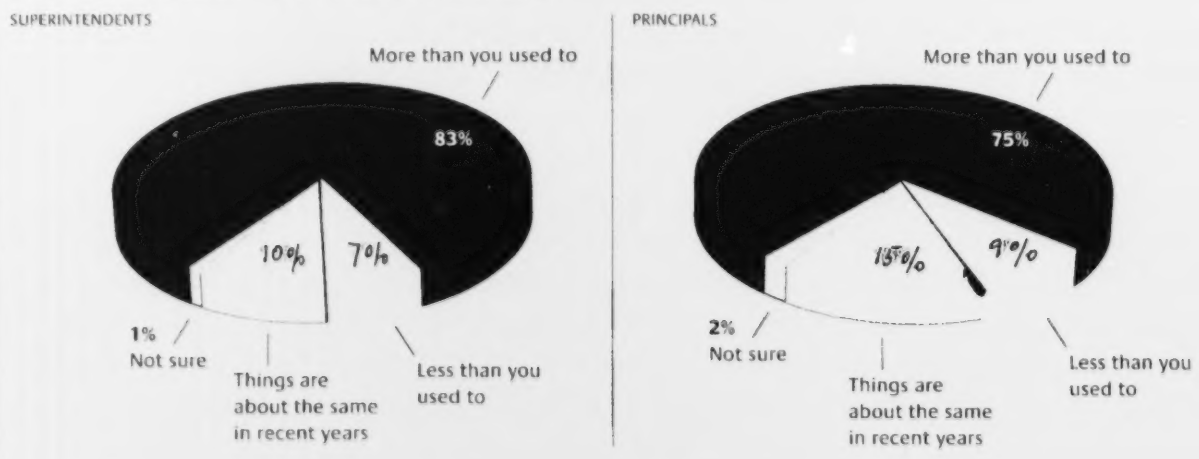
Accountability, instructional leadership, closing the achievement gap, teacher quality—these are the words that today's school leaders use to describe what they are trying to accomplish in their districts. Their responses to this survey indicate that they are actually changing how their districts work, not just paying lip service to the latest fad. And they appear to truly believe that these changes are right to make. For example, relatively few superintendents or principals (20% and 16%) believe that high school exit exams are a bad idea. Most (53% and 60%) believe that such tests should require students to demonstrate basic skills and knowledge, while an additional 24% and 19% say these tests should require students to show even higher levels of skills and knowledge. These are not people who are shying away from standards or hoping they will ignominiously disappear.

Urban Districts More Standards Minded

Urban school districts have been especially responsive to implementing standards—there is a pattern in the data that indicate a greater sense of urgency operating there. For example, school superintendents in urban districts are more likely than their suburban or rural/small-town counterparts to be focusing on quickly improving the language skills of non-English-speaking students (92% versus 86% and 77%). These superintendents are more likely to say that raising

Concentrating on Teaching

When it comes to working on the substance of teaching—e.g., curriculum, teaching techniques, mentoring and professional development—do you find that you are doing:



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The Urban Difference

% of superintendents who say:	SUPERINTENDENTS OVERALL	URBAN SUPERINTENDENTS	SUBURBAN SUPERINTENDENTS	SMALL-TOWN/RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS
There's currently a greater focus on quickly improving the language skills of non-English-speaking students in their district	84%	92%	86%	77%
Raising student achievement is the biggest part of a principal's evaluation	63%	76%	64%	55%
They have moved a successful principal to a low-performing school to help turn it around	47%	73%	50%	31%
Students' standardized test scores at the building level are explicit part of a principal's performance appraisal	31%	45%	30%	26%
Students' standardized test scores at the district level are explicit part of a superintendent's performance appraisal	29%	38%	30%	22%

student achievement is the biggest part of how they evaluate their principals (76% versus 64% and 55%), and the pattern is similar among principals themselves (62% versus 54% and 41%). Superintendents are far more likely to have moved a successful principal to a low-performing school to help turn things around (73% versus 50% and 31%). They're more likely to explicitly use standardized test scores to evaluate their principals (45% versus 30% and 26%). And urban superintendents also are more likely to say they are explicitly evaluated according to students' standardized test scores (38% versus 30% and 22%).

No Child Left Behind

Given its scope and prominence, it is understandable that No Child Left Behind has become the focal point of so much attention, hoopla and debate. Indeed, it was often the first thing that superintendents and principals themselves wanted to talk about in the focus group discussions. After all, NCLB is arguably the boldest federal effort in recent memory to influence how states, cities and local school districts manage the public schools. It has been identified as a Republican president's chief education initiative, which means it is fated to have partisan political implications. NCLB may be the most visible embodiment, but the language, assumptions and policies of standards writ large were in place, on the ground, in school districts across the nation long before NCLB.

FINDING FOUR:
No Child Left Behind—the Devil's in the Details

There is a complicated, ambivalent mind-set among school leaders with regard to NCLB. Although it is clear to superintendents and principals that the law is here to stay, few think it will work as currently crafted. Although they agree with the spirit of the law, most say adjustments are needed, and many question the political intent behind it. Still, given all the challenges they face, relatively few say NCLB is their major problem. Superintendents from large school districts are consistently more optimistic about the benefits of NCLB.

By the time students returned to school in September 2003, the No Child Left Behind Act had been the law of the land for 20 months—enough time so that in a radio address, President Bush reported to the nation that all 50 states and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico submitted compliance plans that were approved by the Department of Education.

By many accounts, NCLB represents the most significant federal policy initiative on education in decades, explicitly designed to change how states and local school districts educate children. The law relies heavily on annual testing for students and sets out clear consequences for schools where students repeatedly fail. Already there have been controversies about schools with great reputations that received unexpectedly negative evaluations and on differences between the states and the feds on the definition of success.[10] But how has NCLB been received by the people who arguably have the most responsibility for putting it into effect—the country's superintendents and principals?

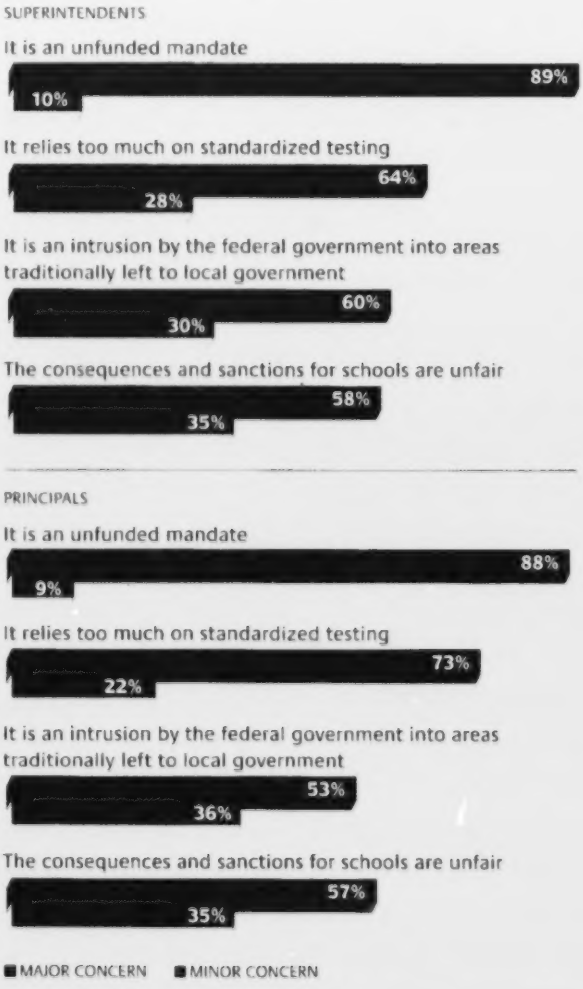
The Feds Get in Line

The nation's school leaders have complicated, ambivalent feelings toward the legislation. For one thing, they think of it as yet another mandate from an additional layer of government that they have to deal with—it's as if the federal government has gotten in a long line of folks who are already telling them what to do. Most superintendents (60%) and principals (53%) say a major concern of theirs about the act is that it's "an intrusion by the federal government into areas traditionally left to local government."

One principal itemized his laundry list with frustration: "Stakeholders are attempting to define what we do, when we should do it and how we should do it. Whether it's NCLB,

NCLB Provokes Many Concerns

When it comes to NCLB, is [insert item] a major concern, minor concern or not a concern at all?



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whether it's state, local or even our independent school boards. We have people that are telling educators, the practitioners, what to do with kids, how to do it, when to do it, and they really don't have, in most instances, any idea of what they're doing." Even lacking a certain clarity about the details of NCLB, the expectations and first reactions of superintendents and principals reveal a mix of views—resentment, resignation and hopefulness—along with a persistent sense that for the legislation to succeed, some serious tinkering will be necessary.

Not So Fast

Despite the hoopla, most school leaders surveyed say that NCLB has yet to have all that much real impact on their districts and schools. Merely 1 in 4 superintendents (25%) and principals (24%) say the law has led to "a lot of change" to date. This may not be all that surprising—after all, the law is not even two years old, and many of its operational details are still being worked out. Still, with all the commentary and analysis by education groups, associations and media pundits, the measured pace of change is a useful reality check.

Against warnings that the sky is falling or promises that salvation is at hand, there are moderating notes. The percentages who "know a lot about the specific elements of the No Child Left Behind Act" are hardly overwhelming—57% of superintendents and 41% of principals. It also is useful to remember that there's a lot on school leaders' plates besides this law. Relatively few—20% of superintendents and 33% of principals—say implementation of NCLB is the most pressing issue facing their district.

Is It Meant to Help or Destroy?

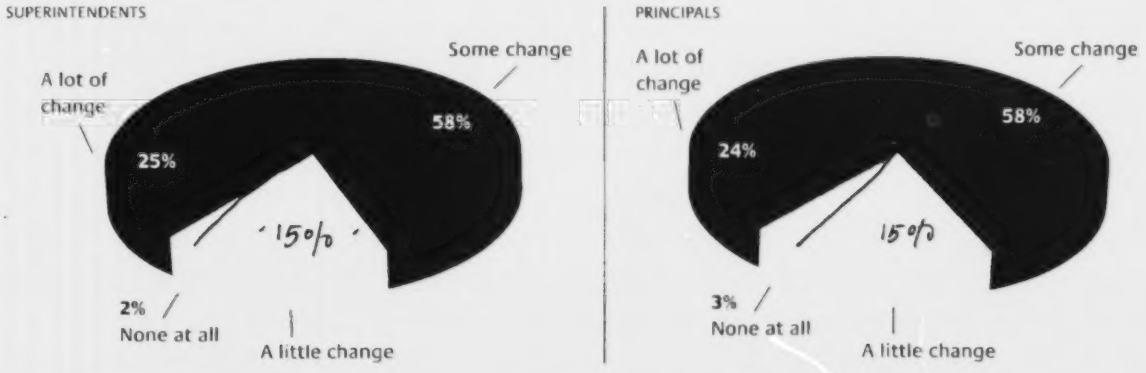
School leaders divide over NCLB's fundamental purpose: many think of it in positive terms, some think it serves objectives that are merely political and not a few see darker, cynical forces at work. When asked to choose among three ways to describe what motivated the law, 40% of superintendents and 46% of principals say it is "an effort to improve the nation's public schools and is motivated by good intentions." But another 22% and 29% say it is "motivated solely by politics," while 31% and 18% call it "a disguised effort to attack and destroy public education." The focus groups provided ample examples of the three outlooks. The positive: "I think the spirit of the law is right on target, personally. I think the spirit says every child that enters our doors needs to be dealt with. And I guess I give public educators a whole lot of credit because I think we'll figure it out." The skeptical: "Well, who's going to argue with No Child Left Behind? I mean, look at the concept. What wise politician is going to say, 'No, I'm against No Child Left Behind. I think we ought to leave some children behind.'?" And the cynical: "I'm a Republican, but I tell you, I see No Child Left Behind as a way to render public schools almost at an impossible expectation to perform so that you can get vouchers into the system."

Will It Actually Work?

There are signs of ambivalence and uncertainty not only about the intent, but about the ultimate impact of the law. Very few superintendents (5%) or principals (4%) predict that the act will work simply as written. Instead, most (61% and 65%) say the law "will require many adjustments before it can work." Sizeable numbers (33% and 30%) think it probably won't work. Asked to predict what NCLB will ultimately do to standards in their state, fewer than 4 in 10 (38% and 37%) say its ultimate impact will be to raise standards. Instead, 40% of superintendents and 38% of principals say there will be little impact on standards, and about 1 in 4 (23% and 25%) say standards

Impact of NCLB to Date

How much actual change has your district/school made to its policies and programs as a result of NCLB?



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will be lowered to make it easier to show progress. As one principal commented, "The NCLB mandates are placing some unrealistic expectations [and] pressures on school systems across the nation. However, the overall intent of the law is very purposeful.... The law will force schools to be mindful that student achievement is top priority."

Doing More Without Getting More

In the focus groups, one of the first complaints typically voiced was that NCLB requires districts to do more without getting more. As noted earlier, almost 9 in 10 superintendents and principals (89% and 88%) say a major concern of theirs is that NCLB is an unfunded mandate. They noted that schools will be judged by how much progress they make with their most challenging students, but the perception is that they will have to do it with the same money they now get—or even in the face of budget cuts. Remedial help for struggling students, teacher quality requirements, administering tests—all of these legal requirements have costs, school leaders pointed out. Indeed, although NCLB was enacted with bipartisan support, arguments about its funding seem poised to generate partisan bickering in the 2004 presidential election.

Asked to evaluate the requirement that schools "show adequate yearly progress with the standardized test scores" of special education students or those who are English learners, about half (49% and 48%) see it as unreasonable and undoable. Much of the remainder (42% of superintendents and 40% of principals) call it reasonable and doable, but only with major changes, while very few say it can be done as is (7% and 9%). One principal put it this way: "Raise scores, raise scores, raise scores. We're going to mandate different activities, but we're not going to fund them. Then you top that with the special ed issues, and I think that many of our principals, at least in our district, are just saying that there's not enough support out there for us to do our jobs."

A Worthy, Unmerciful Goal

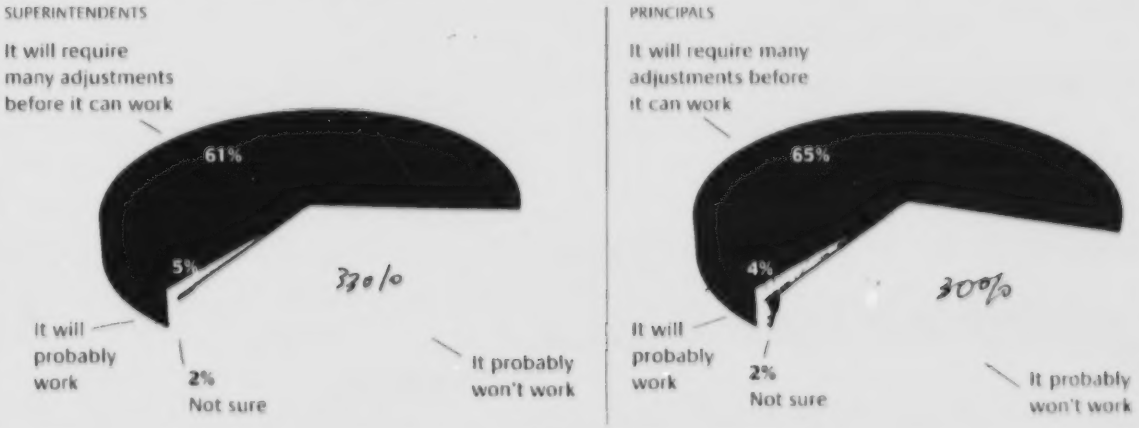
As a group, the superintendents and principals surveyed typically find standardized tests useful and rely upon them, but most nevertheless say that NCLB relies on tests too much (64% and 73%). The paradox is not all that hard to understand. School leaders worry about the practicality of requiring testing for hard-to-reach students, such as those in special education, and whether it is fair or realistic to require schools to show the same kind of progress with the most challenging populations. "Some of the goals, such as [inclusion in] their standardized testing program, are very unrealistic. To say that I'm going to have, in essence, a poor school if I can't have 95% of a particular group of kids— low socioeconomic, minority or the special ed population—[included] in the assessment program....That's a very high hurdle, that's what I think bothers me, the practicality of it. The worthiness of the goal, great. But it is going to be just unmerciful, I'm afraid."

The Threats, the Blame

Nearly 6 in 10 (58% of superintendents and 57% of principals) say that "the consequences and sanctions for schools are unfair" under NCLB's testing regime. One principal foresaw trouble even for traditionally successful schools because they start with a higher floor and have less room to show yearly progress: "Take adequate yearly progress for the NCLB, the assessments. We may have high-performance goals, kids are achieving, are going into higher ed, but if we don't make that

Fine-Tuning Needed

Which best describes your view of the practical effectiveness of NCLB?



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adequate yearly progress, then what's next? The threat of takeover? The threat of losing your license? I mean, it's ridiculous."

Underneath it all, school leaders are convinced that if their schools get the "need improvement" label, the public will be riled and blame them, not the law. More than 7 in 10 say that parents and community members will "blame educators and the schools for failing to improve." Few (16% and 13%) think the public will blame the law for wrongly labeling the schools. Even fewer (4% of each group) think the public will rally to the schools with more money and support.

Some of It Is Useful, Doable

School leaders are relatively comfortable with some core aspects of NCLB. For example, most superintendents and principals (55% and 59%) believe it's realistic for them to achieve one NCLB requirement—that all teachers of core academic subjects be highly qualified. Another of the more visible requirements of the law—the requirement that all students be tested each year in grades 3 to 8 and at least once in grades 10 to 12—also draws modest majority support. Most superintendents and principals (55% and 53%) think of this as a useful aspect of NCLB "because the data will show where improvement is necessary"; more than a third (36% and 37%) believe this "amounts to too much testing." Half (50%) of superintendents also say that another of the law's provisions regarding testing—breaking out scores by race and other groupings—is helpful "because it forces schools to address gaps in achievement." But nearly 4 in 10 (38%) say it's counterproductive "because it stigmatizes groups with lower scores." The data are reversed among principals: 50% say it's counterproductive to break out test scores this way, and 37% say it's helpful.

There are doubts and misgivings—even a degree of suspicion—among school leaders toward No Child Left Behind. But there is no revolution in the offing and, even more important, no hard-core resistance to the basic assumptions of the act.

Large Districts Most Receptive to NCLB

One of the more intriguing results in the survey concerns receptivity to NCLB. Superintendents from large school districts (10,000 plus students) are consistently more optimistic about the benefits of the act—especially its testing provisions—while superintendents from small districts (fewer than 2,500 students) are consistently less so.

Positive Aspects of NCLB

% who say:

	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
It's realistic to expect all teachers of core academic subjects to be "highly qualified"	55%	59%
Testing students annually is useful because the data will show where improvement is necessary before it's too late	55%	53%
Breaking out standardized test scores by race and other groupings is helpful because it forces schools to address gaps in achievement	50%	37%

Superintendents leading large districts are about half as likely as those leading small districts to believe that NCLB "probably won't work" (22% versus 41%). They're more likely than small-district leaders to think that standards will be raised as a result of NCLB (43% versus 28%).

Large-district leaders are much more likely to believe that the requirement to break out and publicize students' standardized test scores by race is helpful—66% versus 29%. By a margin of 49% to 32%, large-district leaders are more likely to think they can show adequate yearly progress with test scores of special education students or English learners—provided major change takes place. They are less likely than small-district leaders to worry that NCLB relies too much on standardized testing (56% versus 77%). By a margin of 67% to 44%, large-district superintendents are more likely to believe that NCLB's requirement for yearly testing is useful.

The Comfort Zone

These differences are eye-catching not only because they are large and consistent, but because they have policy implications. Large districts have consistently been the nation's focus on education reform—and the standards movement in particular. This was apparent in the focus group discussions, where superintendents from large districts spoke in the vernacular of standards. They regularly visited national conferences and seminars, they had access to political higher-ups at the state and federal levels and they had mobile careers, having moved across district and state lines. They seemed comfortable with formal processes and quantitative measures of evaluation—indeed, many already used them to oversee their large domains.

Small-district leaders, on the other hand, had a far more intimate perspective. They often spent entire careers in the same

NCLB Resonates with Large-District Superintendents

% of superintendents who say:	SUPERINTENDENTS OVERALL	LARGE-DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS (10,000+ STUDENTS)	SMALL-DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS (<2,500 STUDENTS)
It's a major concern that NCLB relies too much on standardized testing	64%	56%	77%
Testing students each year in grades 3-8 and at least once in grades 10-12 is useful	55%	67%	44%
Breaking out students' standardized test scores and achievement by race and other groups is helpful	50%	66%	29%
Higher standards will be the ultimate impact of NCLB in their state	38%	43%	28%
NCLB probably won't work	33%	22%	41%

district, not to mention the same state. Typically, they knew the personal histories of their staff and had visited—if not hired—all of them. Family ties and personal connections mean their attitudes toward employees may not simply be driven by objective performance criteria. It may be reasonable to ask whether enough attention has been paid to the challenges they face and their reactions to the standards movement overall—and to NCLB in particular.

A Tale of Two Districts

The most striking conversation capturing this fundamental difference in perspective took place between two superintendents—one from a large district, the other from a small. The large-district superintendent said, "I've been in other states—Indiana, Texas—and those states have had the advantage of a decade of moving up the ladder with criterion-referenced testing and accountability. [My state] has not done that. Now you've got the feds coming in saying, 'Wherever you are, you've got to show growth.' So, I think [state] just has a huge, huge leap to make. But I've been in this state three years, and I think the quality of educators is outstanding. I don't think they're going to have any trouble dealing with it. It's just a matter of embracing it and saying, 'Okay, that's my target. I'll get my kids there.'"

And these were the comments of her neighbor, the superintendent of a far smaller district: "I think No Child Left Behind will really be good for all kids. I believe that whole-heartedly. But in a small, rural community, it's already impacted 18 of my classroom aides and 11 of my teachers, because they do not meet the highly-qualified instructional guideline. We have to let every parent in our district know that we have teachers that aren't highly qualified....In a community of 5,000 where there's no industry, 50% of my kids are Native American, 25% of those kids come to us without running water or electricity, I don't think I'm going to have the human resources to recapture all of the human resources that I have to put out on the street. I think it's a detriment to small, rural schools."

Political Errata

An election year is coming up, a time when observers and pundits reflexively start to view everything through a bottom-line calculation: how it will affect the race. And some may sift through the findings above for ammunition, seeking to calculate political gains and losses from what school leaders have to say about NCLB. And, whatever their viewpoint, they will probably find pieces of evidence that go in their favor.

But the mind-set portrayed here is a complicated one, and cherry-picking from among the findings inevitably misleads. There are doubts and misgivings—even a degree of suspicion—among school leaders toward No Child Left Behind. But there is no revolution in the offing and, even more important, no hard-core resistance to the basic assumptions of the act. In fact, there is some support for them. School leaders are no strangers to standards, testing and accountability—as the previous finding made clear. What's more, not much has changed yet as a result of NCLB. Many of those surveyed don't even know all that much about the details of the law. Finally, there are some crucial differences between the leaders of large and small districts that need to be engaged and addressed.

The ultimate verdict on NCLB depends on its impact, and its impact depends in large part on implementation and adjustments that do or do not occur. Those who truly aim to help schools can use these findings to identify areas that might warrant a careful second look—instead of looking for political winners and losers.

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FINDING FIVE:
A Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom

Concerns about teacher quality are not nearly as pressing to superintendents and principals as other problems, but they identify some troublesome gaps between the abilities new teachers have and the skills superintendents and principals say they need. School leaders and teachers differ markedly on the usefulness and impact of professional development: superintendents and principals rely heavily on it as a means to improve teacher quality, but teachers have mixed feelings.

Taken as a whole, research by Public Agenda and others suggests that school leaders are generally satisfied with the quality of their teaching corps. Negligible numbers of superintendents (3%) and principals (3%) point to poor teacher quality as the most pressing issue facing their district. Similarly small numbers say they would fire a lot of tenured teachers in their district if they could. In the 2001 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, only 10% of principals cited "lack of high-quality teachers" as a big problem. And in a study by Public Agenda in 2000, 69% of principals and 47% of superintendents reported that they were very satisfied with the overall quality of their current teaching staff.[11]

What New Teachers Lack

But school leaders see room for improvement in the skills and abilities of new teachers entering the profession. In the 2000 Public Agenda study, superintendents and principals had less than stellar reviews of new teachers in a number of areas. For example, only about half said new teachers come into the profession with effective teaching techniques, with talent for motivating students or with the ability to maintain discipline and order in the classroom.[12]

In the current study, superintendents and principals say that significant numbers of the new teachers they come across "need a lot more training on effective ways to reach struggling students" and "a lot more training on effective ways to handle students who are discipline problems." Most principals are satisfied—but superintendents divided—when it comes to the number of new teachers who have enough exposure to pedagogy and theories of education. Content knowledge, however, is one area that new teachers have well in hand according to majorities of both superintendents and principals.

In the focus groups it was evident that school leaders feel it is their responsibility—and the responsibility of principals especially—to coach and mentor newer teachers. "Teachers don't come in as experts," a principal told us. "When you hire green teachers out of the field, they're not experts. Somebody's got to be there to develop them…It's not an accident that somebody becomes a good teacher."

Content with Content

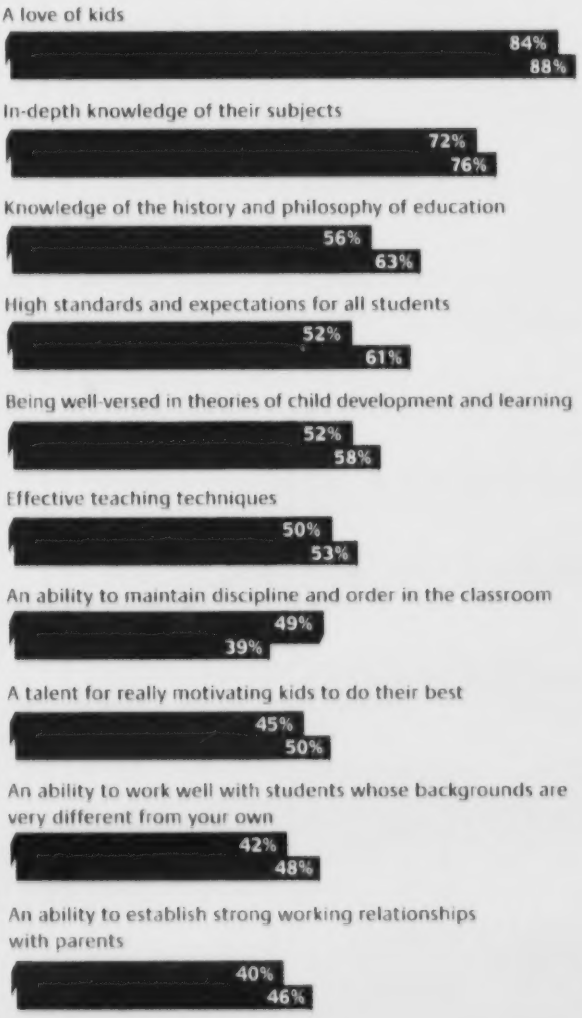
About how many of the new teachers you see need a lot more:

	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Content knowledge of the subjects they teach		
None/A few	60%	74%
More than a few	26%	18%
Quite a large number	14%	8%
Exposure to pedagogy and theories of education		
None/A few	49%	61%
More than a few	31%	26%
Quite a large number	18%	12%
Training on effective ways to handle students who are discipline problems		
None/A few	26%	27%
More than a few	40%	35%
Quite a large number	33%	38%
Training on effective ways to reach struggling students		
None/A few	12%	16%
More than a few	30%	31%
Quite a large number	57%	53%

Rating New Teachers

Thinking about the new teachers coming into the profession, do most have [insert item] well in hand or do too many fall short?

% who say new teachers have this "well in hand":



A Sense of Calling, Public Agenda 2000

Not in Sync

Which of these teachers do you think is highly qualified—the teacher whose subject knowledge is above reproach or the one who has that special way with kids? This question, of course, is too simplistic, but whether teaching is mainly a science or an art is likely to be an ongoing debate in education circles. Based on *Rolling Up Their Sleeves*, there is a noteworthy discrepancy between what the No Child Left Behind Act calls for in terms of "highly-qualified" teachers and what superintendents and principals say they need from the new teachers entering their districts and schools.

NCLB focuses on years of education and subject knowledge to define "highly qualified"—inarguably critical characteristics for a good teacher to have. But, for the most part, it does not address the practical teaching skills that school leaders seem most concerned about, such as the ability to handle discipline or to help academically struggling students. These are two areas where school leaders say new teachers fall short. Similarly, while NCLB requires state certification for a teacher to be deemed highly qualified, only handfuls of superintendents (5%) and principals (11%) believe that certification in their state guarantees a first-rate teacher. One principal said, "Just because a teacher has a degree, and they are qualified, and they're getting by, doesn't mean we should keep them."

The Art of Teaching

Some critics of teaching today believe that college graduates with a solid command of subject matter often have the core ingredient necessary to be effective teachers, and they urge that the field be made more open to them. Some are working to establish alternative paths to teaching that will circumvent many of the traditional education requirements.

NCLB focuses on years of education and subject knowledge to define "highly qualified"... But, for the most part, it does not address the practical teaching skills that school leaders seem most concerned about.

But to many school leaders, there is a great deal more to the art of teaching. The ability to bring a subject alive, to notice an individual child's strengths and weaknesses, to adapt to a variety of learning styles in the same classroom, to shift gears when current events take them in a different direction, to find alternative approaches when a child fails to grasp the material—to many, these things are as important as having an advanced command of history or science or literature, if not more so. "I just call it the gift," said one principal. "It's something that is hard to explain, but you know it when you see it. You hire it. You put it in your classroom.... They go in, and they do miraculous things."

Ironically, in the current education environment, it is quite possible for a teacher to fulfill the highly-qualified components of the No Child Left Behind Act and still not be equipped with the skills and abilities that school leaders say are necessary for effective teaching.

Relying on Professional Development

According to superintendents and principals, offering opportunities for professional development is one way for schools

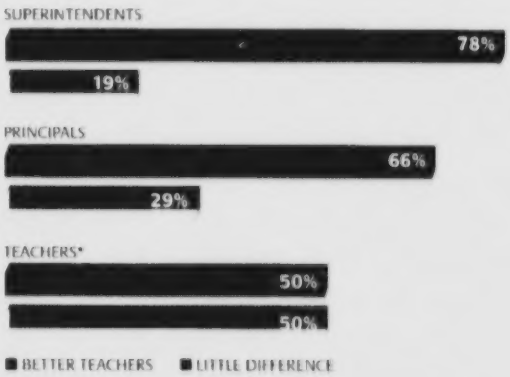
to improve teacher quality—among new and veteran teachers alike. Asked which of three strategies would best improve teacher quality, a plurality of superintendents choose expanding professional development opportunities (49%) over making it easier to remove ineffective tenured teachers (39%) or implementing merit pay (10%); on this question, there are substantial differences in the views of large- and small-district superintendents (see chart). Principals, for their part, are split equally between more professional development (44%) and easier teacher removal (43%).

The data consistently show that superintendents and principals rely on professional development and are broadly convinced that it is useful to teachers. In *A Sense of Calling*, large majorities of both groups said that additional professional development for teachers would be very effective in improving teacher quality (72% of superintendents and 64% of principals). In the current study, even larger majorities (83% and 75%) say they are "doing more than [they] used to" when it comes to things like "curriculum, teaching techniques, mentoring and professional development," and large majorities (74% and 70%) also say they wish they could be "doing a lot more" of this type of work. Finally, 78% of superintendents and 66% of principals think that the professional development their teachers have had in the recent past has made them better at what they do.

Most superintendents rate their principals as doing either an excellent (16%) or good (47%) job when it comes to "matching professional development to the needs of the staff in their building." One superintendent we spoke to said: "I look at what they do with their retreats with their faculty, how they involve faculty in that co-process, too. That's critical. Not just the principal up there as the top-down person, but making sure that the faculty is actually involved in sharing professional staff development opportunities. We have a fairly liberal budget, allowing teachers to attend various opportunities for staff development. They're going to come back and share."

Did It Make You a Better Teacher?

Thinking about the professional development that teachers in your district/school have had in the recent past, did it actually make them better teachers or did it make little difference?



*Teachers were asked about their own recent experiences with professional development.

But Are They Out of Touch?

Are superintendents and principals overestimating the impact of professional development? In a study of public school teachers conducted by Public Agenda earlier this year, only 50% said that the professional development available to them in the recent past made them better teachers—the other 50% said it made little difference.[11]

Rolling Up Their Sleeves may not be able to provide a definitive answer to this question, but it is nonetheless a good one for school leaders to ask. If teachers—the people purportedly benefiting from professional development—rate the opportunities available to them as mixed, perhaps the schools—and, more important, the students—may not be getting the return on investment they should be.

What Would Make the Most Difference?

Which of these would be a better way to improve the quality of teaching?	SUPERINTENDENTS OVERALL	LARGE-DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS (10,000+ STUDENTS)	SMALL-DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS (<2,500 STUDENTS)	PRINCIPALS OVERALL
Expand professional development	49%	64%	29%	44%
or				
Implement merit pay for teachers	10%	9%	14%	9%
or				
Make it easier to dismiss ineffective tenured teachers	39%	27%	54%	43%

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FINDING SIX:
Unless They Do Something Off the Wall

Teacher tenure is a sore spot for school leaders. Most say teachers receive tenure without proving effective know-how, and, according to most superintendents and principals, it's difficult—sometimes almost impossible—to remove a tenured teacher. Majorities say the union sometimes fights to protect inadequate teachers and sometimes resists doing things that would improve education. Teachers' views of their unions, not surprisingly, are considerably more positive.

Teacher tenure is a perennial sore point for school leaders, so much so that in *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game*, "making it much easier for principals to remove bad teachers—even those who have tenure" gained more support than raising administrators' pay. The issue is important to them, but since it is hardly one they control—collective bargaining sessions focus primarily on incremental changes to work contracts—tenure is one area they have to work around.

Tenure Is a Sore Spot

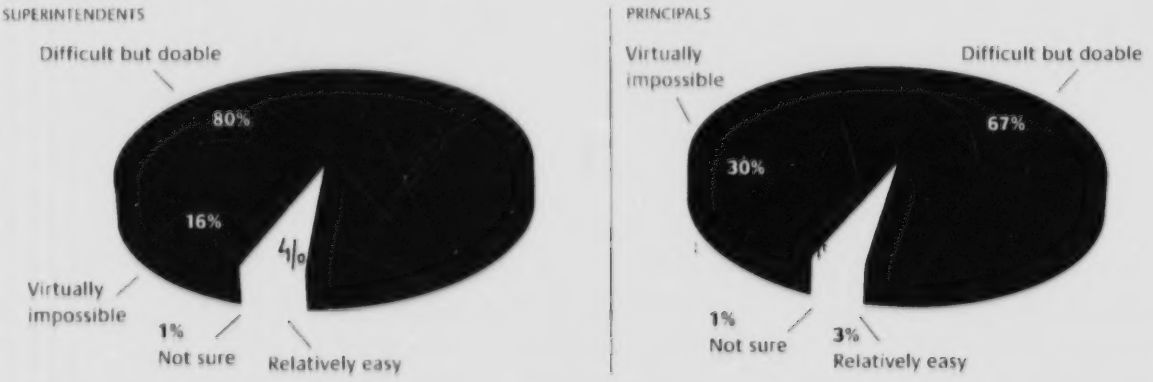
As reported in finding 5, most school leaders are generally satisfied with the bulk of their teaching corp. Nonetheless, the idea that teachers have such strong job protection through tenure is a sore spot. For many superintendents and principals, teacher tenure too often prevents them from doing what they perceive to be the right thing for schools, students and other teachers. They report that once tenure is granted, removing a teacher is an onerous process—at times even impossible.

Virtually no superintendents or principals (4% and 3%) say it's relatively easy to fire a tenured teacher—even when the survey question describes the dire case of a teacher who was "terrible in the classroom." Most (80% and 67%) say it's "difficult but doable," while 16% of superintendents and 30% of principals say it's all but impossible.

"It takes a year and one-half to get rid of a tenured teacher unless they do something that's just absolutely off the wall," complained one principal. "Educators, we're our own worst enemy. We don't get rid of those people that shouldn't be in our profession anymore, because we're afraid that we might get a grievance or a teachers' union might gang up on us." This principal had just gone through the process and still had a bad taste in his mouth. "The teacher tried to turn the tables and claimed that I was creating a hostile work environment. Both the local union and the state union jumped on board. So now the issue changed from addressing a teacher who should

It's Not Easy to Say Good-bye

How difficult would it be for you to fire a tenured teacher who was terrible in the classroom?



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Should Good Teachers Worry?

Which comes closer to your own view about tenure?	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS	TEACHERS
Good teachers don't have to worry about tenure, and it's hard to justify it when virtually no one else has their job guaranteed these days	80%	65%	23%
or			
Tenure protects teachers from district politics, favoritism and the threat of losing their jobs to newcomers who could work for less	14%	22%	58%

have been out of the classroom years ago to how I dealt with that teacher through that process, making sure I dotted every 'i,' making sure I crossed every 't.' Any mistake I made, that's where the focus of the conversation shifted to."

Private versus Public

When it comes to dismissing staff, the difference between the private sector and public school districts can be eye-opening, especially for newcomers to the public schools. A superintendent chuckled when he related this story: "There's a fellow on the board from a private corporation, and he talks about eliminating people who are not putting [in] enough effort. When you explain the tenure laws to him and what that means, he says, 'Well, but they won't be here next year, right?' Then I explain [how] it takes 519 days on average…There's a process, you have to do this and you have to do that. He just can't believe it."

There is limited sympathy for the rationale behind tenure in the minds of school leaders. Only 14% of superintendents and 22% of principals say that "tenure protects teachers from district politics, favoritism and the threat of losing their jobs to newcomers who could work for less." Instead, fully 80% of superintendents and 65% of principals say that "good teachers don't have to worry about tenure, and it's hard to justify it when virtually no one else has their job guaranteed these days." This is just about the opposite of what a recent Public Agenda survey found with public school teachers. In that survey, 58% believed tenure protected them from politics and favoritism, while only 23% said good teachers don't need it.[14]

No Guarantee

What all three groups do appear to agree on, however, is that the existing systems do not guarantee great or even good teacher quality, whether it's the initial certification or the subsequent granting of tenure. Few superintendents (5%) or principals (11%) say that being fully certified guarantees that "the typical teacher has what it takes to be a good teacher." Most (61% and 56%) say it guarantees only a minimum of skills, and about a third (34% and 31%) say it guarantees very little. Among teachers, 30% say certification guarantees a good teacher, 46% say it guarantees only a minimum of skills and 15% say it guarantees very little.[15]

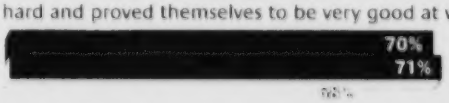
Tenure, once awarded, is also no guarantee of quality. Seven in 10 superintendents (70%) and principals (71%) say that in their experience, tenure "does not necessarily mean that a teacher has worked hard and proved themselves to be very good at what they do"—and 58% of teachers concur.[16] One would imagine that since tenure's protections are so strong, school leaders would require the most stringent proof of performance from candidates and scrutinize each with extreme diligence. Indeed, 53% of superintendents in the survey say they have made tenure more difficult to get in their district.

Tenure, Certification: There's No Guarantee

% who say:

State certification guarantees a typical teacher has only a minimum or very little skills

Tenure does not necessarily mean that a teacher has worked hard and proved themselves to be very good at what they do



■ SUPERINTENDENTS ■ PRINCIPALS TEACHERS

Slipping through the Cracks

But the realities of day-to-day life in school districts can be complicated precisely because they are run by human beings —and the detailed statutes they create. "The statute really ties and directs the process. You have to notify them, give them so many months to improve, and by the time you can notify them of nonrenewal, they're already into another contract. By statute, by the time you can get rid of them, they will still have been in a classroom almost three years in this state," said one superintendent. Another recalled an incident that was a

turning point for him: "One of the elementary principals wanted to deny this teacher tenure. The union came in and said, 'Have you looked at her evaluations?' She had nine evaluations from him that made her sound like…Teacher of the Year, and all of a sudden he really didn't think she deserved tenure. The principal was sloppy. He was afraid to put down anything critical."

The Genealogy of Job Protection

According to *Rolling Up Their Sleeves*, some principals are reluctant to be hard-nosed in their evaluations of teachers; documentation can be sloppy; educators are often wary of looking like bad guys, especially when it is with people they know personally and who have ties in their communities. Forty-two percent of superintendents and 48% of principals say there are people in their district or school whose jobs are protected by "politics, friendships or family ties." From press accounts, some might imagine that large school districts are more likely to be vulnerable to cronyism and paternalistic hiring practices. But superintendents in small districts (52%) are more likely to report this as a problem than those in large ones (38%). "I'm in a community of 5,000 people," said one superintendent. "If you're the principal in any building, many of your staff have relatives that work their way back through the genealogy to the school board member. It's a fact of life."

The idea that teachers have such strong job protection through tenure is a sore spot.

A principal talked about how close to home inheriting someone else's problem can hit: "It makes you look like the bad guy. Here you come along and all of a sudden, there's a problem, so then you start looking like the problem. Then the PTA or the media gets involved, and that's where they get legalistic. And because of the teaching, you do really get to know people. You get to know their families, and you take it really personal." And things happen to teachers themselves—one principal described how two formerly great instructors deteriorated over the course of several years because of mounting personal problems and family loss. Such cases put administrators in a quandary—how to maintain their leadership and the loyalty of other staff while upholding their responsibilities to students.

Just a Handful

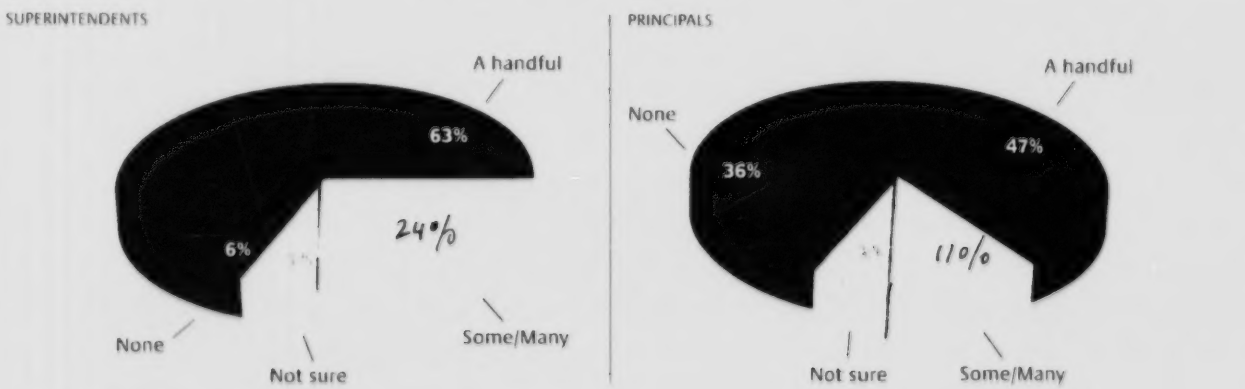
Interestingly, most superintendents (71%) and principals (65%) reject the view that there is a "big dropoff in the hard work and enthusiasm of teachers after they receive tenure." Even more telling is the realization that as grating as the tenure issue appears to be for them, most school leaders would not leap to wholesale firing of tenured staff at the first opportunity.

By their accounting, the nightmare employee hiding behind legal protections appears to be relatively rare. Asked how many of the tenured teachers in their district they would fire if they could, most superintendents (63%) say it would be "a handful," while 24% say it would be more than that. Nearly half of principals (47%) say it would be "a handful" in their school, but an additional 36% would not fire anyone.

A principal who had inherited a subpar instructor from a reconstituted school whose staff was redistributed told how she has to work with the system: "Under the tenure laws and the legalities under which we work, he couldn't just be fired. So I have a staff member who I feel is incompetent. I have

Only a Few Bad Apples

About how many of the tenured teachers in your district/school would you fire if you could?



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been documenting all year, and we'll begin an intensive assistance program tomorrow. I have a meeting with personnel. So there is a plan to give this person an opportunity to improve. But that's one faculty member who's different from all the rest. It's a very hardworking faculty."

Tenure does appear more likely to stymie superintendents working in large districts. Almost 4 in 10 (39%) large-district superintendents say they would fire "some" or "many" of their tenured teachers if they could, compared to only 16% of small-district superintendents.

Other Costs to Tenure

Judging from the focus group comments, the tenure system ties the hands of school leaders in other, more subtle ways—not just by protecting jobs. A principal described a sort of affirmative action program for tenured teachers and job openings: "Tenured teachers have an opportunity to bid for schools they'd like to go to. It's not a requirement that you hire a tenured teacher, but if you have a qualified tenured teacher, they are expected to have preference over someone who's not tenured." Another principal talked about a different challenge—hiring new, enthusiastic teachers only to lose them at the point at which they gain tenure: "I will get new blood in, and they have new ideas, and they really infuse some things into our group. Then the minute they get tenure, they move somewhere closer to where they live."

What's Right for Kids

Although many of those interviewed in the focus groups for this study had productive relations with their local unions, it was over staffing issues that, perhaps predictably, tensions were most likely to flare. Overwhelming majorities of superintendents (86%) and principals (84%) say the union sometimes fights to protect teachers who really should be out of the classroom. In a previously conducted Public Agenda survey, only 47% of teachers agreed.[17]

Going further, 76% of superintendents and 62% of principals say the teachers' union sometimes resists doing things that would improve education in their district. Teachers have a diametrically opposite view: nearly 2 in 3 (65%) say the union usually fights for things that would improve education in their district.[18] One superintendent betrayed his frustration with the unions, saying there is a whole contradiction between educational unions and the major factors that improve education. "We are not driven by what we know is right for kids, and we know that. It's more by labor unions, employee situations, the business aspect of what we do. I would like for us to have the opportunity to do it strictly on the basis of what's best for the kids."

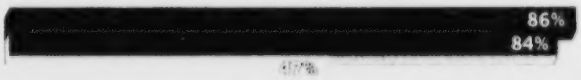
The Two Things I Need

Tenure reform is clearly important to school leaders, but it's really driven by an underlying factor—the desire for top-notch staff. That's why when superintendents were asked in the focus groups the one change they would make if they could, most picked two things: professional development and tenure reform. To the people running the schools, both are directly connected to improving the quality of their staff. "I'd eliminate tenure, that's for sure," said one. "Then I think I would do lots of staff development within the classroom."

Union Blues?

% who say:

Sometimes the union fights to protect teachers who really should be out of the classroom



The teachers' union sometimes resists doing things that would improve education in their district

■ SUPERINTENDENTS ■ PRINCIPALS TEACHERS

In their dream scenario for reform, tenure would no longer be recognizable as it is today. Pluralities of superintendents (44%) and principals (39%) would move to three- or five-year renewable contracts instead of tenure. Contracts have an appeal because, as school leaders acknowledge, teachers sometimes need job protection. Leaders themselves have personal memories of politically-motivated or personality-driven conflict in districts. "The idea of renewable contracts appeals to me. I have lived with some crazy people on the board. If they were to regain control, I could really see good people in the teaching ranks being victimized because they weren't on the same page. Renewing a contract over five years will probably put them beyond any single person's particular agenda. I do think teachers need some level of protection. But what they have now is just insane."

Another 40% of superintendents and 35% of principals would simply make it far easier to remove tenured teachers. But very few would do a "once over lightly." Fewer than 1 in 10 would take milder action by simply increasing the number of years before tenure eligibility (9% in both groups). Even fewer would leave tenure untouched altogether (3% and 8%).

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The Law, Power and Raw Emotion

Still, tenure reform appears to be one policy conversation so loaded with pitfalls and political dangers that few can figure out a way to begin and complete an initiative. By their own account, the contractual negotiations school leaders conduct with teachers' unions are about the details—incremental changes are all that are expected to come out. What's more, as even superintendents and principals will sometimes agree, teachers carry with them a heightened sense of vulnerability and can easily imagine being the target of an irate parent, an unfounded accusation by a student or an administrator with a personal grudge.

"I do think teachers need some level of protection. But what they have now is just insane."

–SUPERINTENDENT

In the past several years, very few states have made a serious effort to fundamentally change their tenure system, perhaps because the issue is so wrapped up in legal restrictions, political power and raw emotion. So an issue that appears to be very important remains mostly off the table. Most school leaders predict it will remain that way: only 15% of superintendents and 22% of principals say it's likely that teacher tenure reform proposals will be taken up in their state in the near future.

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FINDING SEVEN:
The Principal Difference

Most superintendents think that a good principal is key to a successful school; principals, for their part, are less likely to feel a principal alone can fix a troubled school. Superintendents are more likely than principals to think it's a good idea to hold principals accountable based on student achievement. Overall, superintendents give principals a mediocre performance evaluation and seem especially concerned about their ability to determine teacher quality. Both groups give unenthusiastic reviews to formal administrator training programs, and few view principal certification as proof of high-quality skills.

As the job requirements for public school principals have become more and more challenging—instructional leader, wise manager, problem solver, master negotiator, savvy politician—so too have the criteria for evaluating principals become more and more rigorous. These days not only are principals judged on their ability to keep school bells and buses running on time, but also on the quality of their teaching staff and the scores their students achieve on standardized tests.

Can Principals Save a Struggling School?

Superintendents are convinced that a good principal is at the heart of any given school's accomplishments. Most superintendents believe that a good principal is the key to a successful school—62% say that moving a principal with proven talent to a low-performing school is an excellent way to turn that school around; 78% of superintendents in large districts feel this way, compared with 47% in small. As we reported in finding 3, 87% of those who deployed this strategy say that the underperforming school improved. "The bottom line," according to one superintendent, is that "it comes down to the leadership of the principal, if you've got a quality principal who holds teachers accountable for instruction and student achievement."

Principals, on the other hand, have a less romantic notion of what they alone can achieve and are more likely to view themselves as battle-weary soldiers than as knights in shining armor. Only 41% of principals say moving a successful principal to a low-performing school is an excellent way to turn that school around—3 in 10 say it's either a bad strategy (30%) or that they are not sure (29%).

Holding Principals Accountable

Superintendents, by an overwhelming margin, think it's a good idea rather than a bad one to hold principals accountable for students' standardized test scores at the building level (73% versus 18%). This is a significant increase from the 67% of superintendents surveyed in 2001 who considered it a good idea. Interestingly, superintendents' views are consistent: 72% also say it's a good idea to hold *superintendents* accountable in this way.

Principals, although increasingly more accepting, are less sanguine about the use of students' test scores as a measure of their own performance. Forty-one percent think that holding principals accountable for students' standardized test scores is a good idea—up from 34% two years ago—while 45% think it is a bad one. When principals are asked if it would be a good idea to hold *superintendents* accountable in this way, 46% say it's a good idea and 39% bad.

In the focus groups, some principals took great pains to clarify that it's not accountability itself that concerns them, but rather whether they have the tools and conditions to deliver

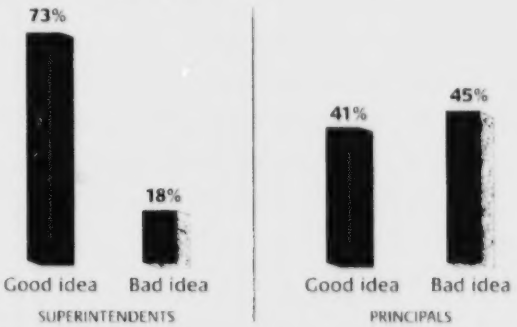
Send Good Principals to Poor Schools?

Which comes closer to your view about moving a successful principal to a low-performing school?

	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
It is an excellent way to turn a school around with proven talent	62%	41%
or It is a bad strategy because it robs a high-performing school of a successful leader	17%	30%

Hold Principals Accountable for Test Scores

Generally speaking, is it a good idea or a bad idea to hold principals accountable for students' standardized test scores at the building level?



the goods— and whether test scores are the best measure. "Unfortunately, what might be coming through to you and to anyone else who gets this information…about accountability and standardized testing…is that school administrators are shying away from accountability. I don't think that's true. What you hear people say is that, yes, of course, [student achievement] needs to be improved. Everything needs to be improved, otherwise, we're dead.…[What] you hear [is], 'I'll take [the test] as one piece of evidence.'"

With increasing pressure on funding, many mandates to fulfill, hectic schedules and the inability to remove problem staff, many principals feel caught between a rock and a hard place. "We believe in accountability," said another principal, "but how do you cope with that accountability?…It's a little bit of everything, but no one has redefined our role. We are supposed to do more and more."

How Superintendents Rate Principals

Principals got a lukewarm assessment from superintendents when Public Agenda surveyed them two years ago in *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game*. Out of a list of 13 possible measures of leadership qualities, a majority of superintendents (65%) said they were "happy" with their principals on only one—albeit extremely important—item: putting the interests of children above all else. On a dozen other measures, no more than a third (36% at most) said they were pleased with their principals' performance.

This year, we asked superintendents to rate their principals on a different series of items, and the results were similarly uninspiring. Only 24% of superintendents rate their principals as excellent when it comes to insuring that students and teachers keep student achievement as the single most important goal (another 53% rate them as good), and an even smaller 11% say their principals do an excellent job holding teachers accountable for instruction and student achievement (another 55% rate them as good).

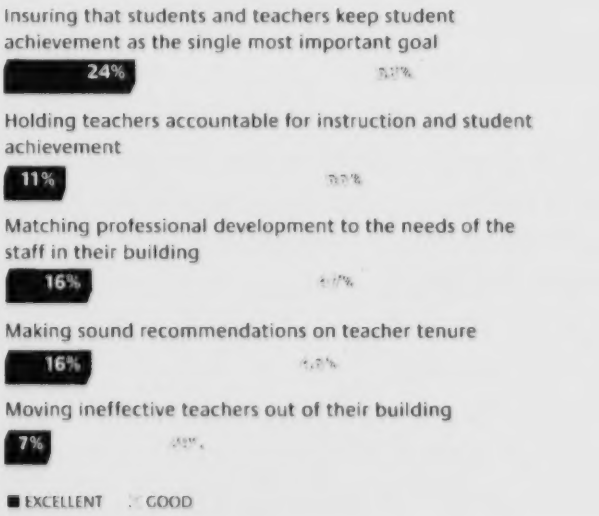
Can They Manage Their Staff?

Another of the areas where principals seem to fall short of excellence, according to superintendents, is their ability to determine teacher quality. Only 16% of superintendents rate their principals as excellent when it comes to making sound recommendations on teacher tenure (another 45% rate them as good). Only a handful (7%) say their principals are excellent at moving ineffective teachers out of their building (another 29% rate them as good). Yet most superintendents (78%) and principals (57%) say that, currently, principals in their school are evaluated according to their ability to judge and improve teacher quality.

In one of the focus groups, a superintendent described a conversation that he recently had with a group of principals: "Inevitably you get a comment, 'Oh, not him,' or, 'Not her.' I would just simply say, 'Who granted the tenure? Who made the recommendation for tenure?' And principals would literally look at themselves…We have performance-based pay…in our administrators' contract. And one of the criteria for that performance-based pay is, in fact, selection and retention of quality staff and their responsibility in that. They're assessed on that. Not so much that they made a wrong decision first out, but whether they live with that decision even past the

How Am I Doing?

% of superintendents who rate their principals as "excellent" or "good" when it comes to:


Insuring that students and teachers keep student achievement as the single most important goal
24%
Holding teachers accountable for instruction and student achievement
11%
Matching professional development to the needs of the staff in their building
16%
Making sound recommendations on teacher tenure
16%
Moving ineffective teachers out of their building
7%
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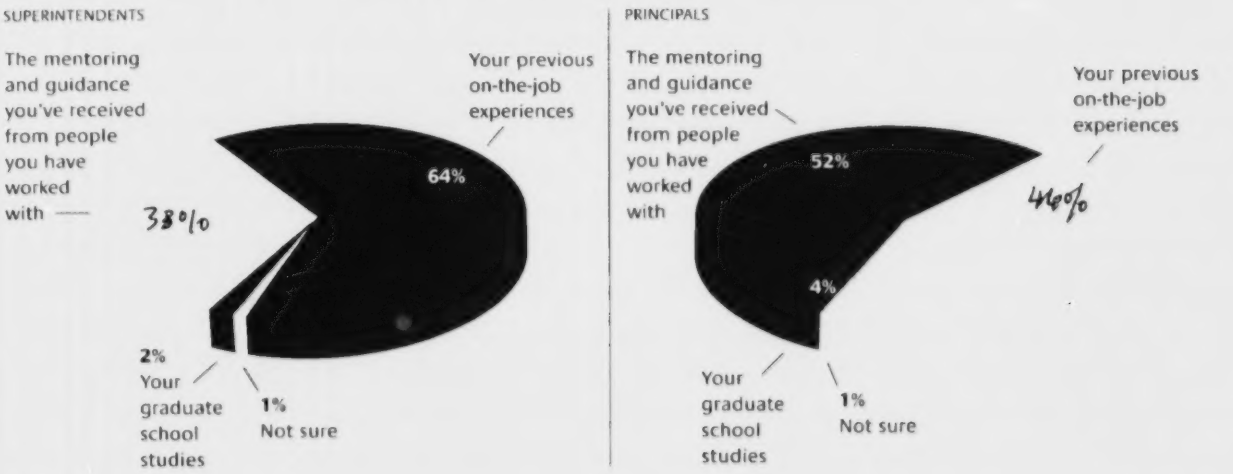
Everything I Needed to Know (I Didn't Learn in Graduate School)

Which was the most valuable in preparing you for your current position?



point of having any benefit. So...they didn't want to be the ones that said, 'That was mine. That was my choice.'"

A principal described it this way: "There are some people who are not bad, mean people—they just don't fit in education roles. It's our job to recognize that early, quickly, and to be brave enough to do something about it, because sometimes it's easy to let the year go by."

Principal for Life?

While teacher tenure is perennially a hot topic in education debates, the issue of tenure emerges with principals as well. Principals, like teachers, have enjoyed some of the protections that come with tenure. It's not uncommon in some school districts to find principals comfortably at the helm of a single school for the better part of their career. One superintendent in a focus group told us about a rumor: Not one high school principal had ever been fired in the history of his state, ever. But with the ever increasing focus on holding principals accountable for students' scores on standardized tests, there are signs that this is changing. According to 43% of superintendents, "principals are much more likely to be removed or reassigned when student achievement is low in their building" (considerably more prevalent among superintendents in large [58%] districts than small [25%]). Twenty-nine percent of principals overall feel this way.

"You go in, and [then you] can pick up the phone and call [other administrators who are friends]. I learned more from those folks about the reality of the job than any college course that I took."

–SUPERINTENDENT

Forget Graduate School?

Neither principals nor superintendents express especially positive views about the formal training that administrators receive in the nuts and bolts of running a school or district. Large majorities of superintendents (72%) and principals (67%) agree that "typical leadership programs in graduate schools of education are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today's school district." These findings may explain why so few say that their graduate school studies were the "most valuable" in preparing them for their current position—only 2% of superintendents and 4% of principals. As one principal put it: "Graduate school—that's probably the worst way of learning what it is that you need to do in order to be a principal or assistant principal."

Among superintendents, most (64%) say their previous on-the-job experiences were the most valuable to them, and a third (33%) say it was the mentoring and guidance they got from co-workers. A superintendent said, "The main experience that I received that helped me in the role of superintendent was as a principal. That's the greatest thing that helped me to become a decision maker." Among principals, a slight majority (52%) point to their co-workers and 44% to their on-the-job experiences.

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Not Indispensable, but Some Useful Things

However, this should not be misconstrued to mean there is no role for graduate training for school leaders. About 7 in 10 superintendents (69%) and principals (74%) say that the graduate program they attended to become a certified administrator provided them with "some useful things that helped prepare" them for the job, and an additional 14% of superintendents and 10% of principals say that what they learned "has proved indispensable." Few say that "very little of what I learned was useful" (17% and 16%).

There was some back-and-forth in the focus groups about whether corporate-type training is beneficial or not for administrators in the public schools. One superintendent told us, "Had I not had some training through the Superintendents Academy…and through [the] Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award, I wouldn't have any idea to do that which I'm doing right now. So part of the training development of a school leader ought to be outside the educational system. It ought to be lots of training on how big businesses and CEOs do their work with their corporate boards…and learn from those."

But there were superintendents who thought a little differently: "In some ways education and business are partners, but they're definitely not the same. And we, as superintendents, need to remember we're in education. It's a public good. Education isn't about profit and production lines…Education is about growth and development…You look at some of these small businesses that have gone out of business, and you look at major changes in corporations—I don't see them as models for us. I see them as partners in ways to work with us. But I think we ought to know more about the core of our business than they could ever know."

Certification for Principals

In *Stand by Me*, Public Agenda's study about public school teachers' views on the teaching profession, only 30% of teachers nationwide viewed state certification as a guarantee that a teacher has what it takes to do the job. Compared to what superintendents and principals think of the authenticity of *principal* certification, 30% would be considered overwhelmingly positive. Only 8% of superintendents and 21% of principals think that being fully certified in their state guarantees that the typical principal has what it takes to be a good administrator. Superintendents are equally as likely to say it guarantees a minimum of skills (45%) as they are to say it guarantees very little (45%). Among principals, 38% say it's a minimum guarantee, 36% that it guarantees very little.

One superintendent described what he got from the certification process like this: "Nothing. You get your credentials, you go in, and [then you] can pick up the phone and call [other administrators who are friends]. I learned more from those folks about the reality of the job than any college course that I took."

According to about 3 out of 4 superintendents (74%) and principals (78%), "the requirements for certifying administrators should be changed to include a lot more focus on practical, hands-on experience." One superintendent told us, "Fortunately I had a class where practicing superintendents came in and actually taught us from a practitioner's standpoint what goes on. And even though you weren't doing it, at least you got a pretty good idea."

Just a Piece of Paper

% who say:	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
The requirements for certifying administrators should be changed to include a lot more focus on practical, hands-on experience	74%	78%
Certification guarantees that the typical principal has what it takes to be a good administrator	8%	21%

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FINDING EIGHT:
The State of the Superintendency

Superintendents say they face countless daily obstacles in their high-stress, high-visibility position, yet they respond with a "can do" confidence and a willingness to be held accountable for their district's performance. On six out of six important measures, substantial numbers of principals say their own superintendent is excellent. Superintendents acknowledge that they put a great deal of energy into managing their school board, but it pays off: most report positive superintendent-board relations.

After analyzing hundreds of pieces of survey data, plus reviewing the transcripts of focus groups with dozens of superintendents across the country, it takes no leap of faith to be convinced that the superintendency is a difficult and demanding job. But three other important points clearly emerge from the data as well: Today's superintendents love what they do; they are ready, willing and able to face the challenges of their position; and—contrary to conventional wisdom—most have healthy, productive and respectful dealings with their school boards.

"I Retired Once and Came Back to It"

Two years ago, 73% of superintendents polled said that if they were just starting out and could choose their life's work all over again, they would stick with the choice they made. This sentiment rang loud and clear in the focus groups for *Rolling Up Their Sleeves* as well, even in the midst of all the grumbling about mountains of paperwork, too few hours in the day, unfunded mandates and so on. In one focus group, when the moderator asked if there was anybody who would pick a different career now that they know what they know, responses came back one after another: "Not me. I love it." "I love what I do." "I do too. I love every day." "I have the best job anywhere." "I retired once and came back to it." In another, one veteran superintendent seemed to speak for her colleagues when she said, "I've been in the business 32 years and have been a superintendent almost half of that. And I've got to tell you, I'd do it all over again."

"I've been in the business 32 years and have been a superintendent almost half of that. And I've got to tell you, I'd do it all over again."

–SUPERINTENDENT

Superintendents Feeling the Heat

Nevertheless, the challenging and demanding nature of the superintendent's job is unambiguously borne out in findings from both the survey and the focus groups. As we reported earlier, virtually every superintendent interviewed sees the superintendency as a stressful, high-stakes job. And—on top of everything else—it's a job that requires a talent for high performance under extreme pressure. A school leader recalled that before he became superintendent, "I looked at the position of superintendent and saw all the difficult times that they face, and I said, 'I don't ever want to do that, quite frankly.' …That seat gets very hot….You really don't understand until you actually sit in that chair and have to make a decision."

We also have reported that very large numbers of superintendents point to myriad other obstacles that contribute to the daunting task of running a public school district: daily emergencies robbing their time; shortage of funds; difficult negotiations with unions; inexplicable special education requirements that, to their minds, often conflict with good learning; keeping up with countless federal, state and local mandates; contending with sometimes unfair or misleading media coverage—the list seems endless.

"We'll Figure It Out"

Yet the findings draw a portrait of the typical superintendent as a confident and "can do" professional, a leader who is up to the challenge and ready to be held accountable for his or her decisions. "As long as we know the rules, we'll figure it out," one superintendent commented.

One example of superintendents' confidence is how willing they are to put themselves on the line when it comes to the contentious issue of evaluating educators based on student achievement. More than 7 in 10 superintendents (72%) believe that it's a good idea to hold superintendents accountable for

students' standardized test scores at the district level. (In contrast, only 41% of principals feel this way about holding principals accountable for students' test scores.)

Moreover, superintendents believe that the truly talented and committed in their ranks do not shy away from high academic standards or from taking responsibility for their decisions. Superintendents are far more likely to think that "higher standards and accountability compel the more talented and committed superintendents to stay and drive out the less able ones" (46%) than they are to think that their capable and dedicated peers are jumping ship "because of unreasonable standards and accountability" (27%).

Showing No Fear

% who say:

	SUPERINTENDENTS
It's a good idea to hold superintendents accountable for students' standardized test scores at the district level	72%
They favor using 2- or 3-year employment contracts for administrators because it will create a sense of urgency, and administrators will have to rise to the challenge	56%
Higher standards and accountability compel the more talented and committed superintendents to stay, and drive out the less able ones	46%

Superintendents also are open to the use of employment contracts. A majority of superintendents (56%) say they are in favor of two- or three-year contracts for administrators because they "will create a sense of urgency for administrators, and they'll have to rise to the challenge"; 29% say, instead, that they are opposed because "administrators won't have enough time or autonomy to show results that quickly." (In contrast, only about 1 in 3 principals [34%] are in favor and 43% are opposed.) Notably, virtually all superintendents say they feel their job is either very (70%) or somewhat (26%) secure over the next year or two.

In general, superintendents in large districts are especially likely to evince confidence in their abilities. For example, 85% of superintendents in districts with 10,000 or more students think it's a good idea to hold superintendents accountable for students' test scores at the district level, compared with 52% of those in districts with fewer than 2,500 students. They also are more likely to be in favor of employment contracts for administrators because of the "sense of urgency" they create and because they force administrators "to rise to the challenge" (60% of large-district superintendents versus 49% of those in small districts).

"We Owe It to Every Child"

Today's superintendents also see themselves as skilled and committed educators, people who truly have children's best interests at heart. "I believe 100 percent of the kids can do it," a superintendent said. "... It's not going to be easy. No one said it was going to be easy. If you walked into this business thinking it was, you need to walk back out. But I do think we owe it to every child." In Public Agenda's 2001 survey, virtually all superintendents and principals said they considered it absolutely essential for a good leader to "put the interests of children above all else"—and nearly 2 in 3 principals indicated that their own superintendent was successfully meeting this goal. One superintendent told us: "Everything I think, say and do is for kids."

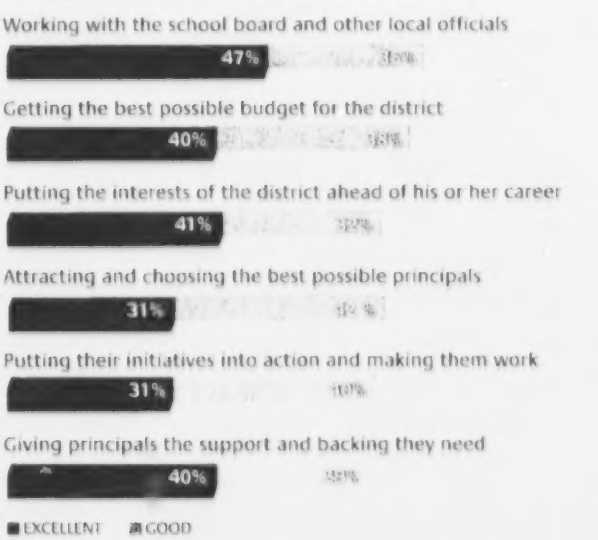
Principals Rate Superintendents

It's one thing for the members of a profession to pat themselves on their collective back for a job well done. It's quite another for the employees who report to them to concur. In this case, principals corroborate superintendents' positive self-assessment.

On six out of six important measures, substantial numbers of principals rate their district superintendent as excellent. Almost half (47%) say their superintendent does an excellent job "working with the school board and other local officials"—and as we will see later in this finding, there is mounting

Principals Rate Superintendents

% of principals who rate their superintendent as "excellent" or "good" when it comes to:


Working with the school board and other local officials
47%
Getting the best possible budget for the district
40%
Putting the interests of the district ahead of his or her career
41%
Attracting and choosing the best possible principals
31%
Putting their initiatives into action and making them work
31%
Giving principals the support and backing they need
40%
EXCELLENT
GOOD

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evidence that most superintendents and school boards do indeed share a collaborative working relationship. Four in 10 also bestow an excellent rating on their superintendent for always putting the interests of the district first (41%), for getting the best possible budget (40%) and for giving principals support (40%). Three in 10 say their superintendent is excellent at finding the best principals (31%) and at making their initiatives work (31%).

Contentious or Cooperative

A close look at the data shows that the supposed adversarial relationship between school boards and district leaders may be considerably overstated. In fact, Public Agenda's research repeatedly counters the negative stereotype that school boards are hotbeds of incivility, strife and partisanship.

In the current survey, relatively few superintendents say their board is characterized by incivility and inappropriate behavior (only 9% say this comes very close to describing their experience, and 12% say it comes somewhat close). And by a margin of more than 3 to 1, superintendents describe their school board as having a cooperative, professional spirit and the best interests of the kids at heart, rather than as one marked by "too much dissension, inexperience and single-issue partisanship" (76% versus 22%). As one superintendent said, "I've had boards for 19 years in two different states. The vast majority of those boards have been—I would characterize the relationship as cooperative and collaborative.... I've only had really one board, two, maybe, where I'd say the relationship was difficult."

In a 2001 study about public engagement in the public schools called *Just Waiting to Be Asked?*, only about 1 in 20 superintendents said that their relationship with the school board was mostly contentious. Most superintendents also reported that when it came to the individual members of their own board, only "one or two" (41%) or "none" (31%) represented "the interests of specific, narrow constituencies."[1] In the precursor to the current study, most superintendents said that during times of crisis or controversy, they could count on their board's support "virtually always" (52%) or "most of the time" (39%).

Some Micromanaging

True, some boards are better than others, and many say that relations "can completely change overnight with an election" (27% say this comes very close to describing their experience, and 31% say somewhat close). A superintendent explained: "I happen to be fortunate because I'm still working with the school board that selected me. That could change next year with a number of seats up. But they came in with an agenda that we shared, so we've worked very closely together on the agenda, on policy. I spent money and time and brought in consultants to help them understand their role....It's a very cohesive environment. I really don't look forward to losing it. I really don't."

Superintendents are equally as likely to indicate their board has a problem with micromanaging and single-issue partisanship (48%) as they are to suggest it does not (51%). One superintendent described his situation like this: "The board is there for the good of the community, and it makes it very easy. But too often you get board members who come away having an agenda, and when that happens, then it makes the superintendent's job difficult." Another, in the same focus group, described his board this way: "There are a couple who

Contrary to Conventional Wisdom

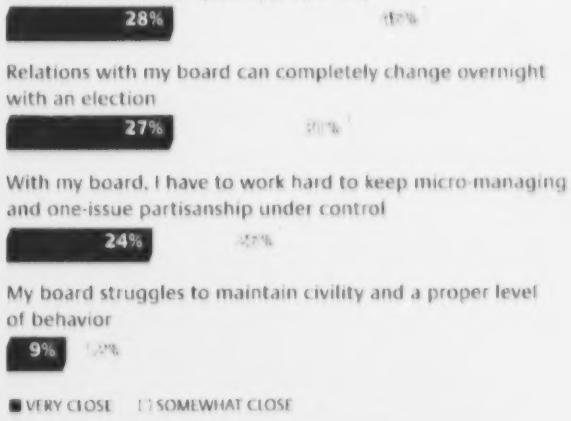
% of superintendents who say:

	SUPERINTENDENTS
During times of crisis or controversy, they can count on the support of their school board	91%
Their board has a cooperative, professional spirit and has the best *interests of the kids at heart*	76%
When it comes to individual members of their school board, few represent the interests of specific, narrow constituencies	72%

Minding the School Board

How close does each come to describing your relationship with your board?

% of superintendents who say "very" or "somewhat" close:


I spend a lot of time educating and training board members to do their jobs appropriately
28%
Relations with my board can completely change overnight with an election
27%
With my board, I have to work hard to keep micro-managing and one-issue partisanship under control
24%
My board struggles to maintain civility and a proper level of behavior
9%
VERY CLOSE
SOMEWHAT CLOSE

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want to micromanage, but…I sat down with the president so that we could get some things out of the way in terms of protocol and how we would work….I do feel some headway was made. However, there are still two or three of those board members who want to usurp or go around the superintendent."

Urban Superintendents Somewhat More Restive about School Boards

While the data do suggest that too much is made of the fractious nature of the superintendent–school board relationship, relations do seem to be somewhat more restive in urban districts—perhaps a consequence of larger numbers of children, the power of organized special-interest groups or the inevitable media spotlight in urban areas. Whereas almost 1 out of 3 urban superintendents (31%) indicate their board struggles to maintain a sense of civility and decorum, only 19% of suburban and 18% of small-town/rural superintendents say the same. And while a majority of urban superintendents (60%) say that they have to work hard to control micromanaging and one-issue partisanship, considerably smaller percentages of suburban (45%) and small-town/rural (45%) superintendents say the same.

Public Agenda's research repeatedly counters the negative stereotype that school boards are hotbeds of incivility, strife and partisanship.

Hand-holding

Most superintendents acknowledge that they devote a lot of their attention to "educating and training board members to do their jobs appropriately"—28% say this comes very close to describing their relationship with the board, and another 45% say somewhat close. This topic dominated the focus group discussions, and it became clear that while the investment is worth it, the personal resources superintendents must give to hand-holding and making contact—in terms of precious time and energy—is draining.

One superintendent spoke about the "constant training, constant…There's never a day when we don't send some kind of communication to them….Being disgustingly honest with you, if you have 18 items on the board agenda, you know before you walk in with it or you pull it, you know where your votes are. So that takes a lot, a lot of work and time of the superintendent." A relatively new superintendent shared that "the communications part of the job with the board takes lots more time than I would have ever guessed." And one old-timer made clear that "the bottom line is, you want them to hear it [from you] before they hear it on the street."

One superintendent talked about his commitment to educating the school board as a matter of establishing his bona fides. "It's our job, as superintendents, to make sure that our boards truly understand effective, ineffective, what's marginal, what is a manager, and what is an instructional leader. That is entirely my job to make my board understand what those are….It's our job, as superintendents right here, no matter what size the district, to make our board persons look as good as they possibly can and educate them to the point that they never waver when we say this guy's a manager and this guy's a leader and this lady is an excellent prospect, I'm moving her up. At that point people start to trust the superintendent."

The Buck Stops Here

As the district's CEO, if you will, the superintendent is ultimately responsible for making sure children learn. To that end, a superintendent must be savvy and somewhat clever about finding out what's really happening in school buildings throughout the district. Superintendents must be astute enough to see through it when disingenuous people try to get into the boss's good graces, and they must be careful not to hear only what they want to hear.

One superintendent described how it is his school board, ironically, that is often an indispensable tool for keeping him in the loop and aware of what's going on. "My school board is my best eyes and ears as to what's really happening in the classroom," he told us. "We all have—at least I've had the experience of having meetings where we're told, 'Yes, we teach grammar,' or, 'We do this and that in our classroom.' One of the school board members said, 'Hey, my kid's in that class, and that never happens.' Now, you always [have] a degree of skepticism, because they have their perception. But I can't tell you how frequently they are right and the information I've gotten from inside the organization is less than accurate."

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Afterword by Ruth A. Wooden, President, Public Agenda

This is the second of two studies conducted by Public Agenda for The Wallace Foundation on school leadership in the public school reform movement. *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game* (2001) captured the voices of superintendents and principals about the pervasiveness of politics and bureaucracy in their jobs. While they showed a strong "can do" spirit in that study, their frustration at the time-consuming paperwork and day-to-day minutiae of their jobs was obvious. Even in those days before the final passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, one could sense that school leaders were running as fast as they could, juggling everything from teacher contracts to bus schedules to politicians restive about the pace of reform. They had their eyes on the road to improved student achievement—and were in the midst of planning their own standards reform efforts—but for the most part, they were still laboring to stay on top of it all.

In *Rolling Up Their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk About What's Needed to Fix Public Schools*, we hear many of the same frustrations they expressed in the earlier study as well as some new ones. It is remarkable, however, to see just how deeply the principles of the standards movement have become embedded in the attitudes of school superintendents and principals. More than 8 in 10 say the push for standards, testing and accountability is here to stay and is not just a fad. There are bedeviling obstacles to be sure, but in this survey we find sizable numbers of school leaders saying they are focusing more on their own role in improving student achievement and working proactively on many fronts toward specific goals of reform. Superintendents appear to be especially forceful in exhibiting this take-charge attitude. One gets the impression that despite the daunting stress of their job, many superintendents might even be reveling a bit in the hot seat. Interestingly, it is the superintendents in both large and urban districts that seem to be most energized to tackle the challenges of improved student achievement and implementation of No Child Left Behind.

The belief that effective school leadership can turn around individual schools and even an entire system has taken hold among a large majority of superintendents and principals. What's more, many say they are doing it: almost 9 in 10 of those superintendents who have moved an effective principal to shake up a low-performing school say their efforts were successful. The school leaders we interviewed are ready and willing to go full speed ahead to assure that the momentum isn't lost. In *Rolling Up Their Sleeves*, today's school leaders identify what they believe they need to fix our schools. Their solutions are not only about traditional concerns such as increased funding (though that would be welcome) but also about improving the teaching and learning conditions that drive the change they so fervently seek for the children in their charge.

Caution: Watch Out for Obstacles Below (and Above)

It is hard to overestimate the intensity with which these school leaders discuss their most vexing challenges. The daily travails of their jobs sound like a description of a particularly noisy video game, with an enormous array of obstacles hurtling from all directions, requiring split-second decisions and no chance to reverse course. At the end of the game, even the most skilled players can be left outgunned or totally exhausted. The superintendents and principals we interviewed for *Rolling Up Their Sleeves* expressed a profound concern about the ongoing assault of politics, micro-management and bureaucracy that drives them crazy—and often drives the most talented among them out of the field.

While the world of public school reform has been dominated recently by discussion of the No Child Left Behind Act, this is only one, and not the most important, of the many challenges that superintendents and principals say they face every day. At the top of their list is the relentless pressure of too much to do (and much of it not top priority) with not enough money to do it (and with the prospect of even less in the near future). They also reserve great ire for the seemingly endless number of well-meaning mandates—state and local as well as federal—that require enormous amounts of time and paperwork to implement. One principal cited, for example, "organ donation" education as a typical worthy cause that was easy to mandate but difficult to implement. In the end, it is the accumulation of such mandates that makes the school leaders we interviewed so frustrated.

They are not so naive as to think that these mostly unfunded mandates will go away, but they plead for some relief from

those that are the furthest removed from academic achievement. To add insult to injury, they say there is often a great deal of ambiguity in the various laws and regulations that must get sorted out at the school and district level, not to mention that federal, state and local mandates frequently differ from and conflict with one another. This lack of alignment in regulation and law creates not just confusion but added cost as districts cope with the mounting needs for additional administration and legal fees associated with these requirements. The overriding theme for these school leaders seems to be that time is money, and a lot of their day is taken up by activities that are not focused on their most important work: instructional leadership.

They are not so naïve as to think that these mostly unfunded mandates will go away, but they plead for some relief from those that are the furthest removed from academic achievement.

Warning: Go Slow

A continual complaint of school leaders in both *Rolling Up Their Sleeves* and *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game* is the lack of control they have to reward good teachers and remove ineffective ones. These studies, as well as others we have conducted, make it clear that teacher tenure is such a highly-charged subject that it is virtually off the table for discussion in all but a handful of states. Clearly, both superintendents and principals (and public school teachers, as we have seen in a previous Public Agenda study) feel that tenure is no guarantee of excellence in classroom teaching. They say that maintaining order in the classroom and inspiring hard-to-reach students—two extremely important teaching skills—are woefully lacking among the new teachers they see.

Finally, we continue to hear immense frustration on the subject of special education. Superintendents, especially, complain about the complexity of the rules, the lack of funds and the aggravation over lawsuits that come with this territory. Certainly no one spontaneously suggested that they would take on this issue, but their resentment of disproportionate effort and resources was repeatedly voiced in the focus groups. They seemed to be crying out for a more rational approach to the special education equation, but they don't appear to expect any change soon in that direction.

No Child Left Behind

Many school leaders see benefits in the No Child Left Behind Act. "The spirit of the law is right on target," is the way one school leader put it. Nevertheless, solid majorities of the superintendents and principals we interviewed believe that tinkering and refinement of the specifics of NCLB need to be put into place. For instance, they worry about the practicality of requiring their most challenging populations—such as special ed students and English language learners—to show the same kind of progress as others. They are concerned that it relies too much on standardized testing. And, as previously reported, they are especially perturbed about the financial impact of many of the act's stipulations. The findings also suggest that some superintendents and principals may even be resentful at the notion that it was the passage of No Child Left Behind that put these reforms into motion: many say they already had such things in the works in their own districts and schools.

There were a number of "red flag" warnings from these school leaders, but there was one that deserves special attention. We found a healthy dose of skepticism about the motivation behind the No Child Left Behind legislation, with significant numbers saying that passage of the law was driven primarily by politics or an effort to undermine public education. Moreover, the vast majority of school leaders we interviewed believe that schools and school personnel will be blamed for any failures, with the public unlikely to rally to support schools that are labeled as needing improvement. This may be the most critical point of all in this study. These "can do" leaders, with all their energy for the task at hand, may eventually find themselves overseeing dispirited staffs in the face of hostile parents and citizens. Given the generally hard-working attitude we see today, that would be a huge loss of momentum in the progress of school reform.

Resume Speed

When we describe the school leaders of 2003 as "rolling up their sleeves," we do not mean that they are just going about their work the same as always. If anything, we feel that today's superintendents and principals are clearly aware of the serious consequences of their work, and most are not afraid to be held accountable, even in the face of tough odds. They have a fierce faith in their ability to do the job in spite of the many barriers placed in their path. If even a few of the most intrusive and annoying obstacles could be moved out of their way, or if there were just a bit more administrative help, our findings suggest that most school leaders would have even greater confidence that their efforts would pay off with improved student achievement.

Ruth A. Wooden

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Hess, Frederick M. "Lifting the Barrier." *Education Next*, Fall 2003.

2. See, for example, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute & The Broad Foundation. "The Power to Perform." *Education Next*, Fall 2003.

3. See, for example, *Stand by Me: What Teachers Really Think about Unions, Merit Pay and Other Professional Matters*, Public Agenda, 2003. Based on a national mail survey of 1,345 K-12 public school teachers.

4. See, for example, *When It's Your Own Child: A Report on Special Education from the Families Who Use It*, Public Agenda, 2002. Based on a national telephone survey of 510 parents of K-12 public school children who have special needs.

5. Editorial, "Presidential Character." *The New York Times*, September 9, 2003.

6. See, for example, *Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk about Parental Involvement in Public Schools*, Public Agenda, 1999. Based on a national mail survey of 1,000 K-12 public school teachers. See also, *Reality Check 1999*, Public Agenda and *Education Week*. Based on a national telephone survey of 700 K-12 public school teachers.

7. *Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk about Parental Involvement in Public Schools*, Public Agenda, 1999. In a national mail survey of 1,000 K-12 public school teachers, 54% characterize the parental involvement at their school as mostly positive and cooperative; 7% say mostly negative and adversarial; and 35% say an even mix of both.

8. *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Key Elements of Quality Schools*, Harris Interactive Inc., 2001. Based on a national telephone survey of 806 K-12 public school principals and an online survey of 198 K-12 public school principals.

9. *Reality Check 2002*, Public Agenda and *Education Week*. Based on a national telephone survey of 610 parents of K-12 public school students.

10. See, for example, Gootman, Elissa. "Define Paradox? A Leading School, Below Standard." *The New York Times*, September 12, 2003.

11. *A Sense of Calling: Who Teaches and Why*, Public Agenda, 2000. Based on national telephone surveys of 253 public school superintendents and 258 K-12 public school principals.

12. Ibid.

13. *Stand by Me: What Teachers Really Think about Unions, Merit Pay and Other Professional Matters*, Public Agenda, 2003. Based on a national mail survey of 1,345 K-12 public school teachers.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. *Just Waiting to Be Asked?: A Fresh Look at Attitudes on Public Engagement*, Public Agenda, 2001. Based on a national mail survey of 686 public school superintendents.

Methodology

Rolling Up Their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk About What's Needed to Fix Public Schools is based on mail surveys of national random samples of 1,006 public school superintendents and 925 K-12 public school principals. The surveys were preceded by seven focus groups.

The Survey

The first mailing, which included a questionnaire and a cover letter explaining the survey, was mailed on July 21, 2003, to a stratified random sample of 3,000 public school superintendents and a random sample of 4,400 K-12 public school principals in the United States. A reminder postcard was sent on July 28, and a follow-up mailing, which included a questionnaire and a cover letter, was sent on August 4. Each mailing of the questionnaire also included a prepaid business reply envelope. All responses received through September 2, 2003, were included in the final tabulated results.

The process netted responses from 1,006 superintendents for a response rate of 34%, and from 925 principals for a response rate of 21%. The margin of error for both groups is plus or minus 3 percentage points. The margin of error is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups.

The sample of superintendents was randomly drawn from a comprehensive national database of public school superintendents. Superintendents in schools with 2,500 or more students were oversampled to ensure that they would be sufficiently represented in the sample; 83% of students in the country attend schools in districts of this size, and 82% of the superintendents in the sample are from these districts. The sample of principals was randomly drawn from a comprehensive list of K-12 public school principals.

Sample was supplied by Market Data Retrieval (MDR) of Shelton, Connecticut. The surveys were fielded and tabulated by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc., of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pre-testing the survey instrument.

The Focus Groups

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying attitudes toward complex issues. Insights from these groups were important to the survey design, and quotes were drawn from them to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the survey interviews. Quotes were also drawn from respondents' comments written directly on the mail surveys and from follow-up contacts made by telephone and e-mail.

Seven focus groups were conducted with public school superintendents and principals in April and May 2003 in the following six cities: Anaheim, California; Cave Creek, Arizona; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Washington, D.C.; Nashville, Tennessee; and Ossining, New York.

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Complete Survey Results

Rolling Up Their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk About What's Needed to Fix Public Schools

This study is based on national random samples of 1,006 public school superintendents and 925 public school principals. The surveys were conducted by mail July 21-September 2, 2003. The margin of error for both groups is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Rolling Up Their Sleeves is the second in a series of studies on school leadership conducted by Public Agenda for The Wallace Foundation. The first, *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk About School Leadership* was based on national random samples of 853 public school superintendents and 909 public school principals conducted by mail July 27-August 27, 2001. Trend data comparing the answers to questions asked in both years are provided in these survey results.

Results of less than .5% are signified by an asterisk. Results of zero are signified by a dash. Responses may not always total 100% due to rounding. Combining answer categories may produce slight discrepancies between the numbers in these survey results and the numbers in the report.

	SUPERINTENDENTS		PRINCIPALS	
	2003	2001	2003	2001
	n=1,006	*n=853*	*n=925*	*n=909*
	%	%	%	%
Q1. Which one of the following do you think is the most pressing issue facing your district these days?				
Insufficient school funding	70		58	
Lack of strong and talented administrators	6		4	
Poor teacher quality	3		3	
Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act	20		33	
Not sure	1		2	
Q2. Is it your sense that, in recent years, people are paying a lot more attention to the role school administrators play in improving education, or do people tend to overlook the role school administrators play?				
Paying a lot more attention	61		65	
Tend to overlook	34		28	
Not sure	6		7	
Q3. If you had to pick one of the following, which comes closest to your own view? Talented superintendents/principals who leave the field are most likely to leave because they are frustrated by:				
Low pay and prestige	3		9	
Politics and bureaucracy	82		49	
Lack of effort from students	*		1	
Unreasonable demands brought about by higher standards and accountability	13		38	
Not sure	2		4	

	SUPERINTENDENTS		PRINCIPALS	
	2003	2001	2003	2001
	n=1,006	*n=853*	*n=925*	*n=909*
	%	%	%	%
Q4. Which comes closer to your own view on the impact that higher standards and accountability have on superintendents/principals?				
Higher standards and accountability compel the more talented and committed superintendents/principals to stay, and drive out the less able ones	46	47	35	34
The talented and committed superintendents/principals are driven out of the field because of unreasonable standards and accountability	27	24	43	44
Not sure	27	29	22	23
Q5. Which of these best describes your typical experience when trying to get things done the way you want them to be done?				
You often feel like your hands are tied by the way things are done in this school system	15	10	21	19
You can usually get things done the way you want but you must work around the system	47	54	45	48
The system helps you get things done the way you want	35	33	31	30
Not sure	3	3	3	3
Q6. When it comes to your budget, would you say that:				
Lack of funding is such a critical problem that only minimal progress can be made	27	18	23	13
Lack of funding is a problem but you can make progress given what you have	68	73	68	72
Lack of funding is not much of a problem for you	4	9	10	15
Not sure	*	*	-	*
Please indicate how close each of these statements comes to your own view about the impact that litigation may or may not have on your district/school.				
Q7. I'd do things differently in my district/school if I were free from the constant threat of litigation				
NET CLOSE	47		38	
Very close	14		10	
Somewhat close	33		27	
NET NOT CLOSE	53		62	
Not too close	27		30	
Not close at all	26		31	
Not sure	-		1	

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	SUPERINTENDENTS		PRINCIPALS	
	2003	2001	2003	2001
	n=1,006	*n*=853	*n*=925	*n*=909
	%	%	%	%
Q8. It's gotten to the point where the fear of being accused of sexual abuse has made educators wary of being alone with kids or showing them affection				
NET CLOSE	58		56	
Very close	18		21	
Somewhat close	40		35	
NET NOT CLOSE	42		44	
Not too close	26		24	
Not close at all	16		21	
Not sure	*		*	
Q9. Special education laws have encouraged a sense of entitlement among parents, making them too quick to threaten legal action to get their way				
NET CLOSE	88		80	
Very close	55		39	
Somewhat close	33		40	
NET NOT CLOSE	12		20	
Not too close	10		15	
Not close at all	2		6	
Not sure	*		*	
Q10. There's so much focus on documentation and due process that it's difficult to take action against students who are discipline problems				
NET CLOSE	63		66	
Very close	22		29	
Somewhat close	41		37	
NET NOT CLOSE	37		34	
Not too close	26		24	
Not close at all	11		10	
Not sure	-		-	

Here are some problems or challenges that school administrators may face. Please indicate how close each of the following comes to describing your own experiences in your district.

Q11. Daily emergencies rob me of time that would be better spent in the classroom or on teaching issues				
NET CLOSE	56		74	
Very close	14		29	
Somewhat close	42		45	
NET NOT CLOSE	44		26	
Not too close	34		21	
Not close at all	11		5	
Not sure	-		-	

	SUPERINTENDENTS		PRINCIPALS	
	2003	2001	2003	2001
	n=1,006	*n*=853	*n*=925	*n*=909
	%	%	%	%
Q12. My district has experienced an enormous increase in responsibilities and mandates without getting the resources necessary to fulfill them				
NET CLOSE	93	88	88	83
Very close	60	52	52	50
Somewhat close	32	37	36	33
NET NOT CLOSE	7	11	12	16
Not too close	6	9	10	12
Not close at all	1	2	2	4
Not sure	*	*	*	1
Q13. Too often, administrators are obligated to spend a disproportional amount of money and other resources on special education issues				
NET CLOSE	83	84	65	65
Very close	41	45	26	32
Somewhat close	42	39	39	34
NET NOT CLOSE	17	16	34	34
Not too close	15	12	24	23
Not close at all	2	4	10	11
Not sure	*	-	1	1
Q14. It's frustrating to think that there are teachers in my district/school whose salaries are higher than a principal's				
NET CLOSE	35		33	
Very close	13		15	
Somewhat close	23		18	
NET NOT CLOSE	63		66	
Not too close	27		22	
Not close at all	36		44	
Not sure	1		2	
Q15. It's very hard to get a true assessment of a teacher or principal through formal observations, because people tend to tailor their performance				
NET CLOSE	47		59	
Very close	12		18	
Somewhat close	35		40	
NET NOT CLOSE	53		41	
Not too close	34		29	
Not close at all	19		12	
Not sure	1		*	

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	SUPERINTENDENTS		PRINCIPALS	
	2003	2001	2003	2001
	n=1,006	*n=853*	*n=925*	*n=909*
	%	%	%	%
Q16. Keeping up with all the local, state and federal mandates handed down to the schools takes up way too much time				
NET CLOSE*	86	88	84	86
Very close	41	39	37	39
Somewhat close	45	49	47	47
NET NOT CLOSE	14	12	16	13
Not too close	12	10	13	10
Not close at all	2	2	3	4
Not sure	*	*	*	1

*In 2001, respondents were asked: "Thinking about your own experiences in the public schools, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements."

Q17. The requirements for certifying administrators should be changed to include a lot more focus on practical, hands-on experience		
NET CLOSE	74	78
Very close	27	34
Somewhat close	47	44
NET NOT CLOSE	24	20
Not too close	19	16
Not close at all	5	4
Not sure	2	3
Q18. The superintendency is a high-stress, high-visibility job—you have to be able to withstand a lot of heat		
NET CLOSE	98	91
Very close	79	69
Somewhat close	19	22
NET NOT CLOSE	2	5
Not too close	2	4
Not close at all	*	1
Not sure	-	4

	SUPERINTENDENTS		PRINCIPALS	
	2003	2001	2003	2001
	n=1,006	*n=853*	*n=925*	*n=909*
	%	%	%	%
Q19. There are people in my district/school whose jobs are protected by district/school politics, friendships or family ties				
NET CLOSE	42		48	
Very close	17		21	
Somewhat close	26		27	
NET NOT CLOSE	57		51	
Not too close	29		28	
Not close at all	28		24	
Not sure	1		1	
Q20. Too often, there is a big dropoff in the hard work and enthusiasm of teachers after they receive tenure				
NET CLOSE	26		34	
Very close	6		8	
Somewhat close	20		26	
NET NOT CLOSE	71		65	
Not too close	45		37	
Not close at all	26		27	
Not sure	3		2	
Q21. The typical leadership programs in graduate schools of education are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today's school district				
NET CLOSE	72	80	67	69
Very close	29	38	25	29
Somewhat close	43	42	42	40
NET NOT CLOSE	25	16	29	25
Not too close	21	13	22	18
Not close at all	4	3	7	7
Not sure	3	4	4	6
Q22. When it comes to talented educators, wealthier districts invariably get the cream of the crop				
NET CLOSE	72		70	
Very close	27		28	
Somewhat close	46		42	
NET NOT CLOSE	26		27	
Not too close	21		21	
Not close at all	5		6	
Not sure	2		4	

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	2003	2001	2003	2001
	n=1,006	n=853	n=925	n=909
	%	%	%	%
Please indicate whether these potential problems have gotten worse, gotten better or stayed about the same in your district/school in recent years.				
Q23. Parents complaining about school personnel or second-guessing their decisions				
Gotten worse	53		51	
Gotten better	11		12	
Stayed about the same	36		36	
Not sure	1		1	
Q24. Parents complaining about too much academic pressure on their kids				
Gotten worse	29		37	
Gotten better	12		12	
Stayed about the same	57		49	
Not sure	2		2	
Q25. Reduced funding for the schools				
Gotten worse	85		80	
Gotten better	4		3	
Stayed about the same	11		15	
Not sure	*		1	
Q26. Uninformed or sensationalist coverage of education in the local press				
Gotten worse	55		55	
Gotten better	12		10	
Stayed about the same	33		34	
Not sure	1		1	
Q27. The volume and complexity of federal and state regulations regarding special education				
Gotten worse	83		81	
Gotten better	3		3	
Stayed about the same	15		15	
Not sure	*		1	
Q28. How much do you know about the specific elements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)?				
Know a lot	57		41	
Some	39		52	
A little	4		7	
None at all	*		*	
Not sure	-		-	

	SUPERINTENDENTS		PRINCIPALS	
	2003	2001	2003	2001
	n=1,006	*n*=853	*n*=925	*n*=909
	%	%	%	%
Q29. How much actual change has your district/school made to its policies and programs as a result of NCLB?				
A lot of change	25		24	
Some	58		58	
A little	15		15	
None at all	2		3	
Not sure	-		*	
Q30. Which of the following best describes your view of the intent of NCLB?				
It is an effort to improve the nation's public schools and is motivated by good intentions	40		46	
It is a disguised effort to attack and destroy public education	31		18	
It is motivated solely by politics	22		29	
Not sure	7		7	
Q31. Which of the following best describes your view of the practical effectiveness of NCLB?				
It will probably work	5		4	
It will require many adjustments before it can work	61		65	
It probably won't work	33		30	
Not sure	2		2	
Q32. Which one of these comes closest to your view about the ultimate impact NCLB will have on academic standards in your state?				
Standards will be raised	38		37	
Standards will be lowered to make it easier to show progress	23		25	
There will be little impact on standards	40		38	
Some people have voiced concerns about specific parts of NCLB. For each of the following, please indicate if it is a major concern to you, a minor concern, or not a concern at all.				
Q33a. The consequences and sanctions for schools are unfair				
Major concern	58		57	
Minor concern	35		35	
Not a concern at all	7		7	
Not sure	1		1	
Q33b. It is an intrusion by the federal government into areas traditionally left to local government				
Major concern	60		53	
Minor concern	30		36	
Not a concern at all	10		10	
Not sure	1		1	

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	n=1,006	*n=853*	*n=925*	*n=909*
	%	%	%	%
Q33c. It relies too much on standardized testing				
Major concern	64		73	
Minor concern	28		22	
Not a concern at all	8		4	
Not sure	*		1	
Q33d. It is an unfunded mandate				
Major concern	89		88	
Minor concern	10		9	
Not a concern at all	1		2	
Not sure	1		1	
Q34. Overall, do you think NCLB's requirement that districts and states break out and publicize students' standardized test scores and achievement by race and other groupings is:				
Helpful, because it forces schools to address gaps in achievement	50		37	
Counter-productive, because it stigmatizes groups with lower scores	38		50	
Not sure	12		14	
Q35. NCLB will require schools to show adequate yearly progress with the standardized test scores of students who receive special education or who are English learners. In your view is this aspect of the law:				
Reasonable and doable	7		9	
Reasonable and doable but would require major changes	42		40	
Unreasonable and undoable	49		48	
Not sure	3		4	
Q36. NCLB will require states to test all students each year in grades 3 to 8 and at least once in grades 10 to 12. Which comes closer to your view about this aspect of the law?				
This amounts to too much testing and will interfere with good teaching and learning	36		37	
This is useful because the data will show where improvement is necessary before it's too late	55		53	
Not sure	9		10	

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	%	%	%	%
Q37. NCLB requires that by the end of the 2005-06 school year, all teachers of the core academic subjects must be "highly qualified"—i.e., fully certified and have an academic major or pass a subject-matter test in the subjects they teach. Do you think it is realistic or unrealistic to expect your district to meet this requirement?				
Realistic	55		59	
Unrealistic	42		37	
Not sure	4		4	
Q38. Under NCLB, schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress are identified as "in need of improvement" and face increasing consequences. How do you think parents and community members would respond if this happened to schools in your own district? Do you think they would be most likely to:				
Blame educators and the schools for failing to improve	72		76	
Blame the law and policies for wrongly labeling the schools	16		13	
Rally to the schools with extra funding and support to help them improve	4		4	
Not sure	8		7	
Q39. Some states require high school students to pass a test before they are awarded a diploma. In general, do you think these exit exams:				
Should require students to demonstrate basic skills and knowledge	53		60	
Should require higher levels of skills and knowledge	24		19	
Are a bad idea to begin with	20		16	
Not sure	3		5	
Q40. Now assuming there are no problems with the high school exit exams themselves, how do you think your state would respond if it seems that too many students and schools fail to measure up to this kind of test? Do you think your state would:				
Water down the test so that more students and schools pass	15		19	
Postpone implementing the sanctions	40		34	
Stick to its original plan	30		27	
Not sure	16		21	

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	n=1,006	*n*=853	*n*=925	*n*=909
	%	%	%	%
Q41. In your state, does being fully certified guarantee that the typical principal has what it takes to be a good administrator, does it only guarantee a minimum of skills, or does it guarantee very little?				
Guarantees typical principal has what it takes	8		21	
Guarantees a minimum of skills	45		38	
Guarantees very little	45		36	
Not sure	1		4	
Q42. In your district, which of these is the biggest part of a principal's evaluation? How well they do when it comes to:				
Managing their building and budget	10		20	
Raising student achievement	63		48	
Maintaining teacher quality	11		6	
None of these are biggest	15		21	
Not sure	1		5	
Q43. How would you rate your principals when it comes to:				
a. Holding teachers accountable for instruction and student achievement				
NET EXCELLENT/GOOD	67			
Excellent	11			
Good	55			
NET FAIR/POOR	33			
Fair	28			
Poor	5			
Not sure	1			
b. Insuring that students and teachers keep student achievement as the single most important goal				
NET EXCELLENT/GOOD	77			
Excellent	24			
Good	53			
NET FAIR/POOR	23			
Fair	20			
Poor	2			
Not sure	1			

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	n=1,006	*n*=853	*n*=925	*n*=909
	%	%	%	%
c. Making sound recommendations on teacher tenure				
NET EXCELLENT/GOOD	61			
Excellent	16			
Good	45			
NET FAIR/POOR	38			
Fair	33			
Poor	6			
Not sure	1			
d. Matching professional development to the needs of the staff in their building				
NET EXCELLENT/GOOD	63			
Excellent	16			
Good	47			
NET FAIR/POOR	36			
Fair	31			
Poor	5			
Not sure	1			
e. Moving ineffective teachers out of their building				
NET EXCELLENT/GOOD	36			
Excellent	7			
Good	29			
NET FAIR/POOR	62			
Fair	41			
Poor	21			
Not sure	2			
Q43. How would you rate your superintendent when it comes to:				
a. Attracting and choosing the best possible principals				
NET EXCELLENT/GOOD			72	
Excellent			31	
Good			42	
NET FAIR/POOR			23	
Fair			18	
Poor			5	
Not sure			4	

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	2003	2001	2003	2001
	n=1,006	*n=853*	*n=925*	*n=909*
	%	%	%	%
b. Getting the best possible budget for the district				
NET EXCELLENT/GOOD			77	
Excellent			40	
Good			38	
NET FAIR/POOR			20	
Fair			16	
Poor			4	
Not sure			3	
c. Giving principals the support and backing they need				
NET EXCELLENT/GOOD			69	
Excellent			40	
Good			29	
NET FAIR/POOR			30	
Fair			19	
Poor			10	
Not sure			1	
d. Putting the interests of the district ahead of his or her career				
NET EXCELLENT/GOOD			73	
Excellent			41	
Good			32	
NET FAIR/POOR			24	
Fair			16	
Poor			8	
Not sure			3	
e. Putting their initiatives into action and making them work				
NET EXCELLENT/GOOD			70	
Excellent			31	
Good			40	
NET FAIR/POOR			27	
Fair			21	
Poor			6	
Not sure			2	
f. Working with the school board and other local officials				
NET EXCELLENT/GOOD			81	
Excellent			47	
Good			35	
NET FAIR/POOR			17	
Fair			13	
Poor			4	
Not sure			1	

	SUPERINTENDENTS		PRINCIPALS	
	2003	2001	2003	2001
	n=1,006	*n=853*	*n=925*	*n=909*
	%	%	%	%
Q44a. Which comes closer to your view about moving a successful principal to a low-performing school?				
It is an excellent way to turn a school around with proven talent	62		41	
It is a bad strategy because it robs a high-performing school of a successful leader	17		30	
Not sure	21		29	
Q44b. Have you ever moved a successful principal to a low-performing school to help turn it around, or not?				
Yes	47			
No	52			
Not sure	1			
44c. Did the principal turn around the low-performing school, or not?				
Base: Moved successful principal to low-performing school [n=417]				
Yes	87			
No	4			
Not sure	10			
Now, please indicate whether each of the following is currently happening in your district or not.				
Q45. Principals are being evaluated according to their ability to judge and improve teacher quality				
Currently happening	78		57	
Not happening	19		33	
Not sure	3		10	
Q46. Principals are much more likely to be removed or reassigned when student achievement is low in their building				
Currently happening	43		29	
Not happening	50		54	
Not sure	7		18	
Q47. Students' standardized test scores at the classroom level are part of how individual teachers are evaluated				
Currently happening	31		30	
Not happening	67		67	
Not sure	2		4	

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	%	%	%	%
Q48. There's a concerted effort to tackle the achievement gap between minority and white students				
Currently happening	83		76	
Not happening	13		18	
Not sure	4		7	
Q49. There's greater focus on quickly improving the language skills of non-English-speaking students				
Currently happening	84		76	
Not happening	12		15	
Not sure	4		9	
Q50. There's much tougher scrutiny of teachers, and as a result tenure is much more likely to be refused or postponed				
Currently happening	53		36	
Not happening	39		53	
Not sure	8		11	
Q51. Generally speaking, do you think it is a good idea or a bad idea to hold principals accountable for students' standardized test scores at the building level?				
Good idea	73	67	41	34
Bad idea	18	23	45	48
Not sure	9	11	15	18
Q52. In your district, to what extent are students' standardized test scores at the building level part of a principal's performance appraisal? Are they:				
An explicit part of the performance appraisal	31	25	26	24
An informal but understood part of the process	53	50	48	42
Not really a part of how principals are evaluated	15	25	24	31
Not sure	1	*	3	3
Q53. And, generally speaking, do you think it is a good idea or a bad idea to hold superintendents accountable for students' standardized test scores at the district level?				
Good idea	72		46	
Bad idea	18		39	
Not sure	11		15	

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	n=1,006	*n=853*	*n=925*	*n=909*
	%	%	%	%
Q54. In your district, to what extent are students' standardized test scores at the district level part of a superintendent's performance appraisal? Are they:				
An explicit part of the performance appraisal	29		18	
An informal but understood part of the process	48		31	
Not really a part of how superintendents are evaluated	22		24	
Not sure	2		27	
Q55. Which comes closer to your view on using 2- or 3-year employment contracts for administrators?				
Overall I'm in favor because it will create a sense of urgency for administrators, and they'll have to rise to the challenge	56		34	
Overall I'm opposed because administrators won't have enough time or autonomy to show results that quickly	29		43	
Not sure	15		23	
Q56. Do you think that the push for standards, testing and accountability in your state is a fad that in time will go away or is this something that is here to stay?				
A fad that will go away	7		10	
Something here to stay	87		85	
Not sure	7		6	
Q57. Which comes closest to your view?				
Standardized tests do much more harm than good—the schools would be better off if they were completely abandoned	3		5	
Standardized tests are a necessary evil—ultimately, the schools need some kind of standardized assessment	52		61	
Standardized tests are necessary and valuable—they are a reliable yardstick for measuring student performance	44		33	
Not sure	1		1	
Q58. If you heard that many students in your school district did poorly on a standardized test, which of the following would be your most likely reaction?				
That these students simply lack the ability to do well	4		9	
That something was wrong with how the test was designed	9		17	
That the schools failed to adequately prepare the students	71		51	
Not sure	16		23	

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	n=1,006	*n=853*	*n=925*	*n=909*
	%	%	%	%
Q59. In your state, does being fully certified guarantee that the typical teacher has what it takes to be a good teacher, does it only guarantee a minimum of skills, or does it guarantee very little?				
Guarantees teacher has what it takes	5		11	
Guarantees a minimum of skills	61		56	
Guarantees very little	34		31	
Not sure	1		2	
Q60. Which do you think would be the most effective way to improve the teaching corps in your district/school?				
Having a higher quality of prospective teachers to choose from	24		20	
Improved training and preparation of current teachers	55		53	
More autonomy over hiring and firing teachers	20		25	
Not sure	1		3	
Speaking from your experience, about how many of the new teachers you see need:				
Q61. A lot more content knowledge of the subjects they teach				
None	5		11	
A few teachers	55		64	
More than a few	26		18	
Quite a large number	14		8	
Not sure	1		*	
Q62. A lot more exposure to pedagogy and theories of education				
None	7		11	
A few teachers	43		50	
More than a few	31		26	
Quite a large number	18		12	
Not sure	1		1	
Q63. A lot more training on effective ways to handle students who are discipline problems				
None	1		1	
A few teachers	25		26	
More than a few	40		35	
Quite a large number	33		38	
Not sure	1		*	

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	%	%	%	%
Q64. A lot more training on effective ways to reach struggling students				
None	1		1	
A few teachers	11		14	
More than a few	30		31	
Quite a large number	57		53	
Not sure	1		*	
Q65. When it comes to working on the substance of teaching—e.g., curriculum, teaching techniques, mentoring and professional development—do you find that you are doing:				
More than you used to	83		75	
Less than you used to	7		9	
Or have things stayed about the same in recent years	10		15	
Not sure	1		2	
Q66. And, when it comes to working on these things, do you wish you could be doing:				
A lot more	74		70	
A little more	16		19	
Or are you satisfied with how much you are currently doing	9		10	
Not sure	1		1	
Q67. Thinking about the professional development that teachers in your district/school have had in the recent past, did it actually make them better teachers, or did it make little difference?				
Better teachers	78		66	
Little difference	19		29	
Not sure	3		5	
Q68. Among these three reforms, which do you think would be a better way to improve the quality of teaching?				
Expand the pool of qualified applicants by increasing pay for all teachers	33		35	
Improve working conditions in school by reducing class size	23		36	
Make it easier for districts to financially reward outstanding teachers	38		25	
Not sure	6		5	

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	n=1,006	*n=853*	*n=925*	*n=909*
	%	%	%	%
Q69. And, of these three reforms, which do you think would be a better way to improve the quality of teaching?				
Expand professional development	49		44	
Implement merit pay for teachers	10		9	
Make it easier to dismiss tenured teachers who are judged to be ineffective	39		43	
Not sure	2		4	
Q70. Which comes closer to your own view about tenure?				
Good teachers don't have to worry about tenure, and it's hard to justify it when virtually no one else has their job guaranteed these days	80		65	
Tenure protects teachers from district politics, favoritism and the threat of losing their jobs to newcomers who could work for less	14		22	
Not sure	6		12	
Q71. In your district/school, does tenure mean that a teacher has worked hard and proved themselves to be very good at what they do, or does it not necessarily mean that?				
Means a teacher has worked hard and proved themselves	28		25	
Does not necessarily mean that	70		71	
Not sure	3		5	
Q72. And how difficult would it be for you to fire a tenured teacher who was terrible in the classroom? Do you think it would be:				
Virtually impossible	16		30	
Difficult but doable	80		67	
Relatively easy	4		3	
Not sure	1		1	
Q73. About how many of the tenured teachers in your district/school would you fire if you could:				
None	6		36	
A handful	63		47	
Some	23		10	
Many	2		*	
Not sure	6		6	

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	2003	2001	2003	2001
	n=1,006	*n=853*	*n=925*	*n=909*
	%	%	%	%
Q74. In the near future, how likely do you think it is that your state will take up proposals to significantly change the teacher tenure system?				
NET LIKELY	15		22	
Very likely	5		6	
Somewhat likely	10		16	
NET NOT LIKELY	82		69	
Not too likely	42		42	
Not at all likely	41		27	
Not sure	3		10	
Q75. Which one of these approaches to tenure do you favor most?				
Increase the number of years before tenure eligibility	9		9	
Make it far easier to remove tenured teachers	40		35	
Move to 3 or 5 year renewable contracts for teachers instead of tenure	44		39	
Leave teacher tenure untouched	3		8	
Not sure	3		9	
Q76. Do you think that the teachers' union:				
Sometimes resists doing things that would improve education in your district	76		62	
Usually fights for things that would improve education in your district	18		25	
Not sure	7		12	
Q77a. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? The union sometimes fights to protect teachers who really should be out of the classroom				
NET AGREE	86		84	
Strongly agree	47		40	
Somewhat agree	39		44	
NET DISAGREE	14		12	
Somewhat disagree	10		8	
Strongly disagree	3		4	
Not sure	1		4	

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	%	%	%	%
Please tell me how close each of the following comes to describing your relationship with your school board.				
Q77b. I spend a lot of time educating and training board members to do their jobs appropriately				
NET CLOSE	73			
Very close	28			
Somewhat close	45			
NET NOT CLOSE	27			
Not too close	21			
Not close at all	6			
Not sure	*			
Q77c. My board struggles to maintain civility and a proper level of behavior				
NET CLOSE	21			
Very close	9			
Somewhat close	12			
NET NOT CLOSE	79			
Not too close	18			
Not close at all	60			
Not sure	*			
Q77d. Relations with my board can completely change overnight with an election				
NET CLOSE	57			
Very close	27			
Somewhat close	31			
NET NOT CLOSE	41			
Not too close	22			
Not close at all	19			
Not sure	2			
Q77e. With my board, I have to work hard to keep micro-managing and one-issue partisanship under control				
NET CLOSE	48			
Very close	24			
Somewhat close	25			
NET NOT CLOSE	51			
Not too close	26			
Not close at all	26			
Not sure	*			

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	%	%	%	%
Q77f. Which comes closer to describing your school board?				
My board has a cooperative, professional spirit and has the best interests of the kids at heart	76		63	
There's too much dissension, inexperience and single-issue partisanship on my board	22		31	
Not sure	2		6	
Q78. Which of these would you say was the most valuable in preparing you for your current position?				
Your graduate school studies	2		4	
The mentoring and guidance you've received from people you have worked with	33		52	
Your previous on-the-job experiences	64		44	
Not sure	1		1	
Q79. Which of these best describes what you learned at the graduate program you went through to become a certified administrator?				
Other than helping to get the credential, very little of what I learned was useful	17		16	
I learned some useful things that helped prepare me for the job	69		74	
What I learned has proved indispensable in my job	14		10	
Not sure	1		-	
Q80. How secure do you feel your job is for the next year or two?				
NET SECURE	95		95	
Very secure	70		63	
Somewhat secure	26		32	
NET NOT SECURE	4		5	
Not too secure	2		4	
Not secure at all	2		1	
Not sure	-		1	
Q81. Are you:				
Male	82		56	
Female	19		44	
Q82. Approximately how many students are enrolled in your school district?				
Under 600	7			
600-2,499	11			
2,500-9,999	50			
10,000 or more	32			

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	n=1,006	*n=853*	*n=925*	*n=909*
	%	%	%	%
Q82. About how many students attend your school?				
1-299			25	
300-499			28	
500-999			33	
1,000 or more			15	
Q83. Approximately what percentage of students in your school district/school are eligible for the free or reduced lunch program?				
25% or under	34		36	
26% - 50%	41		32	
51% or more	25		32	
Q84. Which of the following best describes the location of your school district/school?				
Urban	18		14	
Urban, inner city	2		6	
Suburban	38		24	
Small town	21		27	
Rural	21		29	
Q85. Over your career, how many years of experience do you have as superintendent/principal?				
4 or less	29		30	
5-14	48		47	
15 or more	23		23	
Q86. Are you the principal of a/n:				
Elementary school			53	
Middle or junior high school			18	
High school			25	
Something else			4	

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When It's Your Own Child: A Report on Special Education from the Families Who Use It. Supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Progressive Policy Institute and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. 2002. 36 pgs. Print Edition Price: $10.00. ISBN No. 1-889483-76-1. "The poll [by Public Agenda] suggests parents feel that while teachers care and school personnel are qualified to deal with disabilities, school systems don't offer special help to children unless families insist…The findings could affect negotiations in Congress over rules for special education programs." – The Associated Press

Sizing Things Up: What Parents, Teachers and Students Think about Large and Small High Schools. Supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. 2002. 60 pgs. Print Edition Price: $10.00. ISBN No. 1-889483-73-7. "Despite national efforts to reduce the size of large high schools, the idea hasn't caught on with parents and teachers, according to polls conducted by the nonprofit research group Public Agenda…The polls provide some guidance to school districts charging ahead with high school restructuring." – *The Boston Globe*

Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership. Supported by The Wallace Foundation. 2001. 50 pgs. Available for free download only at www.publicagenda.org. School superintendents and principals say that good leadership can turn around even the most troubled schools, but that politics and bureaucracy too often stand in the way. Large majorities say they need more autonomy to reward good teachers and fire ineffective ones. More than half of superintendents say they have to work around the system to get things done, and more than half of principals say they feel so overwhelmed by day-to-day tasks that their ability to provide vision is stymied.

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Notes

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